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as the gunslinger-  
turned-lawman

# HEC RAMSEY

THE  
HUNTED  
by Joe Millard



# HEC RAMSEY

... expected trouble when he rode into Santa Rita.

He was an intruder in another man's town, and every gun was turned against him. Ramsey knew he'd have to tangle with old Henry T. Madden before he got his prisoner, Madden's son.

Only Ramsey didn't count on young Madden's being murdered or on Yellow Rose, the girl he'd once loved, being accused of the murder.

With a vengeful father leading a hanging posse on their trail, and a merciless wasteland ahead, Ramsey and Rose were caught in a grim chase ... with little chance of survival.

Would it be death by the noose—or the slow agonies of starvation and thirst?

HEC RAMSEY was a lawman with a job to do and a fast gun to back him up.

HENRY MADDEN owned the town, and had an army of hired guns to carry out his own brand of justice.

THERE HAD TO BE A SHOWDOWN IN SANTA RITA—BUT THE ODDS WERE THE DEADLIEST HEC RAMSEY HAD EVER SEEN STACKED AGAINST HIM!

# **THE HUNTED**

**Joe Millard**

**Based on the Television Series  
Created by HAROLD JACK BLOOM**

**Adapted from the episode  
"Mystery Of The Yellow Rose"**

**Teleplay by JOHN MESTON  
Story by WILLIAM R. COX and  
DOUGLAS BENTON**



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# **HEC RAMSEY**

THE HUNTED

# Chapter One

Mister Jason Crawford, president and sole owner of the New Prospect Crawford Bank, hunched over his desk, meticulously studying a thin sheaf of cards and papers. As he read, his plump face lost its customary “banker look” and took on a rare expression of cherubic good will. His pale eyes warmed, and his pink jowls arranged themselves to frame the beginning of a smile.

The last item in the sheaf was a small but clear photograph of the handsome, virile young man seated across the desk. Crawford’s gaze flicked from the picture to the original several times before he pushed the sheaf across to his customer.

“There doesn’t seem to be a shadow of doubt but what you *are* Brock Madden, all right. I only wish more people would carry such precise and careful identification.” A faint shadow of worry marred the fullness of his smile for a moment. “I hope, sir, you haven’t taken offense at my checking you out so thoroughly. But after all, four thousand dollars is quite a sum of money.”

“It’s perfectly understandable, Mr. Crawford,” Brock said, dismissing the idea with a wave of his hand. “In fact, if you had been less careful, I might have questioned my father’s judgment in suggesting your bank.”

“Do thank him for me,” Crawford said. “If I’m not being too personal, may I ask why you need such a large sum in cash, and why you didn’t take it right to your father’s bank in Santa Rita, New Mexico?”

Brock Madden’s handsome face broke into the charming smile that had broken many a feminine heart.

“I wondered if you’d ask. There’s a rancher outside of Chickasha with a fine herd of shorthorns my father is anxious to buy. But the trouble is, this old coot never learned to read so he doesn’t trust checks. The only way he’ll do business is in good old U.S. money, cash on the barrelhead. The reason I came here to your bank is that the stage has been held up outside of Santa Rita so often lately that I didn’t want to be caught with the cash. So, if you can see your way clear to cash it, you’ll have our deepest appreciation.”

“Any check signed by Henry T. Madden and presented by his son is good enough for me,” Crawford said, pushing back from the desk. He went to a massive safe against the wall and squatted to spin its dial. Over his shoulder he said, “I guess that little old daddy of yours must

be about the richest man in all New Mexico.”

“If he isn’t,” Brock said, grinning, “I just hope nobody ever tells him about it. It’d about break his old heart.”

“I’ve heard your daddy used to be a real hard-riding man. I imagine he still spends most of his time in the saddle.”

“No,” Brock said, sobering and shaking his head. “For the last six years he’s been just about totally chairbound. He’s got arthritis so bad I doubt that he could even climb onto a horse any longer.”

“That’s the way I heard it, too,” Crawford said, grinning sheepishly. “I owe you another apology, I’m afraid, but I simply had to make that one final check.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Brock said again, as the banker began counting taped packets of bills on the desk. He endorsed the check and traded it for the money.

“You arrived in New Prospect at a propitious moment, Mr. Madden.”

“I did? What moment is that?”

“The S.O.S.—that’s the Society of Oklahoman Sisters—is having a grand parade today. Mrs. Crawford’s head of their Rally Committee. That means she’s sort of the whipper-upper of their activities.”

“Wel-l-l,” Brock said, with a fine show of respectful interest. “Now I certainly wouldn’t want to miss *that*.”

“It’s due to start in ...” The banker consulted a fat gold case watch. “... just about three hours from now.”

“Splendid. That will give me time enough to take care of some other matters before the parade begins.” The younger man got to his feet, stowing the packets of money into his jacket. “I do thank you, Mr. Crawford, for your splendid cooperation, and I know I speak for my father as well. In fact, I shouldn’t be at all surprised if he showed his appreciation by throwing some profitable business your way.”

Crawford’s pink cheeks fairly quivered with delight. He pumped Brock Madden’s hand and ushered him to the door with a fraternal pat on the shoulder.

“The opportunity to again serve either you or your father would indeed be an honor and a pleasure, sir.”

Back at his desk, Crawford peered around to make sure he was unobserved. Then he snatched up the check and planted a moist kiss on the crabbed signature of Henry T. Madden.

Outside, Brock Madden pushed his way along the plank sidewalk past knots of morning shoppers, moving with the air of a man in a hurry to keep an important engagement Abreast of the New Prospect Saloon, he wheeled and rammed through the batwing doors, almost



bowling over the swamper, heading out with his bucket of mop water.

At this hour of the morning, the saloon was nearly empty. There were only three men at the bar and they seemed to be doing more talking than drinking. At one of the round tables, a small-stakes poker game was in progress. The four players were nondescript men in faded and worn bib overalls, small ranchers or farmers, judging by appearances. They looked up in some surprise as Brock snatched a chair from one of the empty tables and crowded up between two of the players.

"I told you I'd raise some cash and be back to play," he growled, throwing one of the \$500 packets of money onto the table. "I'll take the whole thing in chips."

The man acting as banker picked up the bills, riffled one end and whistled softly.

"You sure you want to risk this whole wad, friend? I got me a feeling this is gonna be *my* luck ..."

"Dammit, there's plenty more where that came from," Brock rasped. "So cut out the chin music and count me my chips."

The banker hesitated, then shrugged. "It's your funeral, friend."

## Chapter Two

It was going on noon when Deputy Sheriff Hec Ramsey dropped into the New Prospect Saloon for a schooner or two of beer and a two-fisted raid on the free lunch counter. He arrived as Brock was sullenly shoving over another packet of bills in exchange for more chips. A tall stack of identical packets, now stacked at the banker's elbow, gave him a pretty fair estimation of the young man's luck, and a shrewd guess that he was either at, or close to, the end of his bankroll.

The young man was a stranger to Hec, but his obvious situation as well as his reaction to it, portended trouble. Brock's face was ugly and mottled with the hot blood of his rage, only poorly suppressed.

Hec swung around, hooked elbows over the rim of the bar and watched the game as he sipped his beer. To outward appearances, his was only mild and idle interest, but his hooded eyes missed nothing that went on at the table. He was all too familiar with the prototype of the spoiled brat and sore loser, and in his textbook of lawmanship they added up to only one thing—*trouble!*

The new stack of chips was dwindling as rapidly as the other chips must have. Brock had long since lost any of the sound judgment or control he might have had. His betting was reckless to the point of stupidity, as he betrayed the loser's death rattle in a senseless effort to make one killing to recoup. Again and again, he wildly threw good money after bad, only to see the pots raked in by one or another of the unruffled four. Watching the loser's face, Hec reached back and carefully set his remaining beer safely on the bar.

Brock was betting crazily on a busted straight flush. As one of the other players laid down two pairs, Brock cursed thickly, slammed down his worthless hand, and shoved his few remaining chips across the table.

"I've had it. Cash me out."

The banker counted the chips, shook his head sadly and shoved the thin pile of bills across.

"A hundred and ten dollars. Man, you're really a heavy loser today."

"That's what happens," Brock said thickly, shoving back his chair, "when you let yourself get suckered into a crooked game with thieves."

The air was suddenly electric, supercharged with fighting words. Four chairs scraped back simultaneously and four furious players started to their feet. Hec was at the table in two long steps.

“Now, everybody just sit back down and cool the tempers.” He turned the full power of his cold eyes on Brock. “As for you, son, I know poker and I know these men. I’ve been watching this game and you can take my word for it, it’s strictly honest. The trouble with you, young feller, is that you’re far and away absolutely the worst poker player I’ve ever seen, including my six-year-old niece. Now, my advice to you is to take what you have left and go find yourself some other kind of entertainment.”

For long moments Hec faced the young man’s maniacal rage, expecting at any second to be involved in a savage brawl. Then Brock stared from the gleam of the badge on the lawman’s shirt pocket to the respectful obedience of the other four card-players, and some element of caution took control. He drew a long, shuddering breath, scooped up the money remaining to him, and spun away.

He tramped to the bar, murmured briefly with the bartender, then turned and headed up the stairway to the second floor. Going to visit one of the girls, Hec thought. Well, that’s safer entertainment and a lot less expensive than poker, the way he plays it. He turned back to find the four remaining poker players watching him solemnly.

“Much obliged, Hec,” the banker said. “It could have gotten real damn nasty for all of us if you hadn’t nailed the lid on it just right.”

Hec dismissed the praise with a careless wave of his hand.

“I’m as quick as the next fellow when it comes to calling a spade a spade. But I try to make sure first that it really *is* a spade.”

The players returned to their interrupted poker session, starting with a mild squabble over whose turn it had been to deal the next hand. Hec went to the bar for a fresh head on his beer, then took it with him to the free lunch counter where he began to construct an enormous multi-layered sandwich, involving generous samples of every meat, fowl, cheese, pickle and condiment displayed.

At the table, the dealer paused in the act of flipping out cards and cocked his head. In the momentary quiet, Hec could hear the thudding of a base drum, the inexperienced rattle of a snare drum, and the rusty squealing of a fife.

“It must be the parade starting,” the dealer cried, throwing down the undealt pack. “Come on. We don’t want to miss it.”

Pausing only to grab up chips and money, the four dashed out toward the swelling tumult. Two ranch hands, the only, drinkers at the bar, turned to watch the exit, then went back to their more interesting occupation. Hec was crowning his culinary creation with artistic dabs of yellow mustard.

“Hey, Mister Ramsey,” the bartender called. “Ain’t you gonna watch the pee-rade?”

“Hell, no,” Hec said emphatically, shaking his head. “I saw a parade once and didn’t like it one damn bit. So right then and there I swore I’d never inflict another one on myself if I could possibly avoid it.”

The cacophony of fife and drums drew swiftly louder and nearer, accompanied by the murmurous babble of onlookers’ voices and the happy shrieking of children. The parade and its followers drew abreast of the saloon. Over the batwings Hec could see some crudely-lettered placards moving past.

One blared: “WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE”. Another read: “OUST THE DEMON RUM”. A third demanded, “STREET LIGHTS AND EQUAL RIGHTS.”

Hec took a huge bite of sandwich and a deep swig of beer, watching the placards with mild interest. A shrill voice that he recognized as belonging to Banker Crawford’s large, loud and bellicose wife shrieked, “*Halt!*” and the disembodied march of the placards past the doors halted abruptly.

“Here it is,” the militant voice continued to screech, “that Den of Iniquity wherein lurks the Demon Rum—that nectar of Satan that lures men from their homes and tears them from the arms of their loving families. Should this house of horrors, this stygian pit of perdition be allowed to go on existing and prospering from the blood of our suffering community?”

“*NO!*” howled a witch’s chorus of female voices.

“Then have we the strength and the courage to storm this unholy citadel of sin and plant our banners of purity upon its parapets of pestilence?”

“*YES!*” screamed the captive chorus.

“Then onward and upward, all for one and one for all! We have nothing to lose but our shame. *Excelsior! Eureka! Women on the march! Chaaarrge!*”

There was a clatter against the front of the saloon as the placards dipped from view and were tossed aside. The Crawford steam-whistle voice rose in a final war cry: “*Go get ’em, girls!*”

The swinging doors crashed open and women poured in, yipping and howling, eyes blazing with holy zeal. The bartender yelped, “Goddlemighty!” and dived from sight behind the bar. The two cowhands swung around, took one horrified look, and abandoned their unfinished drinks to vanish out the rear door.

Spearheaded by the formidable Mrs. Crawford, the shrieking horde poured into the saloon, thirsting for destruction. Hec took another giant-size bite of sandwich and swig of beer and leaned on the free lunch counter, watching with professional interest as all hell

(feminine-type) broke loose.

Without breaking a stride or interrupting a high, wild screech of animal savagery, the wife of the staid banker sent an empty poker table rolling. Then she snatched up a cuspidor and sent it crashing into the back bar mirror, pride and joy of the town's elite watering place. Two followers wrenched legs off the broken table and used them as clubs on the bottles and glassware behind the bar. Others snatched unbroken whiskey bottles to use as projectiles against mirrors, windows or rows of glassware.

While some women concentrated on wrecking chairs and tables, others grunted and strained in a futile effort to overturn the massive bar. Hec continued to watch, in detached admiration for the thoroughness of the destruction, while he doggedly worked on his sandwich and beer.

Twice he hurriedly moved to a safer spot, once when he discovered himself in the line of fire of a chair-hurling Amazon, and again when the target for thrown cuspidors was the huge nude painting directly behind and above his head. It was not until a pool cue, hurled javelin wise, butt-first, glanced off his skull that he yielded to discretion and took refuge behind the remains of the nickel-operated player piano.

By the time he had finished his sandwich and drained the last dregs of his beer, the tumult had ended. Quiet lay upon the ruins of the New Prospect Saloon as heavily as the mingled scents of whiskey, gin, brandy, beer, wine and rum from shattered bottles and splintered kegs. This was in part because there appeared to be nothing breakable left to break, but mainly because the orgy of destruction had left the women almost totally spent in both body and spirit.

Hec cautiously emerged from his shelter, holding up a hand for attention and raising his voice.

"Ladies! Ladies, may I have your attention for a few moments, please? Do any of you realize that, with all your zeal and earnest effort, there still remains one lone glass in this establishment which you have failed to break?"

Grinning, he held up his empty beer schooner. A few yards away a small, scrawny woman with a tangle of unpinned hair framing her face wound up and delivered a rock that shattered the glass, leaving the handle in his clutch. He shrugged wryly and tossed it onto one of the piles of debris.

He stood then, knuckling his chin and looking vaguely unhappy. He thought of the pleasanter spots he might have been in at this moment. Spots like horseless in front of a herd of stampeding longhorns, broken-legged in a cactus bed full of rattlesnakes, or facing a gang of murderous outlaws with his guns empty.

"Ladies," he began gruffly, then cleared his throat, braced himself and blurted, "I don't exactly know any easy ways to tell you ladies this, but—but—you're all under arrest."

There were gasps, angry snarls and a few scattered *Eeeks* followed by a concerted movement to converge on the hapless lawman. Hec hastily backed up, throwing out both open hands before him. A vagrant ray of sunlight, coming through a shattered window, glittered on droplets of perspiration that dotted his forehead and crawled down his fleshy nose.

"Now ladies ...! Now, just a moment, ladies! You wouldn't feel proud at taking unfair advantage of a lone male just doing his duty. I never put a gun to a lady in my life, and I don't aim to get crowded into spoiling that record. I know practically every one of you, and most of you know me. Wouldn't it be a lot better idea if you all just lined up single file and we marched to the jail to let the law handle everything? Wouldn't that be the fair thing, Mrs. Crawford?"

The banker's wife had come ramming her solid bulk to the forefront to face Hec. Her hair was down, her hat perched over one ear, her big face flushed and sweaty. She planted big, capable fists on her hips and glared at him.

"On what charge, Mister Name-of-The-Law Ramsey?"

"Well-l-l, let's see. There's ..." He ticked the items off on his fingers. "... malicious mischief, destruction of private property, unlawful gathering for the purpose of violating the peaceful commerce of the community and the laws and statutes of the town of New Prospect, parading without a town permit, failure to disperse ..." He spread his open hands. "And that's just for openers, Ma'am. I can come up with quite a few more when I set my mind to it. And, of course the management here will have its own list of charges to file."

"Very well," Mrs. Crawford shrilled dramatically. She thrust out her arms, fists clenched, wrists parallel. "We women are not unfamiliar with arrogant masculine persecution for our principles. Go ahead! Shackle us like animals and drag us off to your jail."

"Now, now, Mrs. Crawford," Hec chided mildly, "just forming a single line'll be sufficient, I'm sure. Besides, there aren't enough handcuffs in New Prospect, or probably all Oklahoma, to shackle you all, if I wanted to. So let's you and me lead off a parade to the jail, and you other ladies fall in behind."

"Do you hear that, Sisters?" she trumpeted. "We are martyrs to our great cause. I shall submit under protest, and I urge you all to do the same. In the end, virtue will triumph."

She sailed majestically out, with Hec trudging unhappily at her side and the other virtuous vandals obediently forming a single line,

snaking out behind their leader. Practically the entire citizenry of New Prospect and the surrounding county was on the street, drawn by the parade initially, and held at a prudent distance by the tumultuous Violence. Now, awed to silence, they fell back, opening a broad space for the prisoners to file through.

Police Chief Oliver Stamp was at his desk, struggling with the endless reports and requisitions of his office. In his neatly pressed broadcloth suit, white shirt and string tie, he looked more like a misplaced schoolmaster than a frontier lawman. He wore no customary gun belt, nor was any visible in the bare office. Even the gun cabinet against the wall, an essential tool of office, was tactfully concealed by a dust cover.

As the door burst open and the yammering horde poured in, Oliver shot to his feet, eyes bulging. His mouth opened and shut several times before he could find voice to raise above the tumult of complaint.

“Ladies! Ladies, if you *please* ...! What seems to be your problem? If you will only calm down and choose one of your number to voice the problem, I am sure I can help you.”

Hec Ramsey came pushing through. His authoritative and thunderous, “*QUIET!*” stilled the babble, at least temporarily.

“Their main problem,” he told the gaping Oliver, “is that they busted the hel—*heck* out of the laws and I had to arrest them on good cause. They’re prisoners.”

Oliver swallowed noisily, tugged his deputy close, and demanded in a hoarse stage whisper, “Are you completely out of your mind, Ramsey? These are the wives of our most important and influential citizens.”

“I don’t give a good ... I mean, I don’t care if they’re the wives of Brigham Young or Sitting Bull. They smashed the saloon and everything in it to holy smithereens.”

“That’s nothing new. Somebody does that, or tries to, every Saturday night.”

“And that same Somebody gets himself arrested—and he couldn’t even *begin* to do the thorough job *they* did on it. So, I arrested them, and I’ve got a list of charges as long as your arm to file.”

“You can just forget them, Ramsey. I will not let you crowd me into this kind of utterly outrag ...”

“Tell me something, Sheriff,” Hec interrupted in a cold, flat voice. “Who was the feller sitting at that very desk the other day lecturing on how the same law is for everybody, rich or poor, big or little? He looked a lot like you.”

Oliver tried to meet Hec's glare, but his effort was a failure. He turned away abruptly to where a stocky, sandy haired man was peering incredulously around the door from the cell block. His voice was louder than he intended.

"Deputy O'Connor," he bellowed, "book these ladies on charges that will be given you by Deputy Ramsey. Then release them on their own recognizance."

"Now, just a minute, Sheriff," Mrs. Crawford cried shrilly. "Just—one—minute! What do you do to trail-hands who wreck the saloon?"

"Why, we lock them up, of course," Oliver said uncomfortably.

"Ah-*hal*!" Mrs. Crawford screeched, shaking a finger almost under Oliver's nose. "Ah-*HAA*! A clear case of double-standard, and we will not accept such discrimination. If we claim protection under the same laws as men, then we insist upon the democratic right to pay the same penalties for breaking the laws. We demand to be jailed, and we intend to stay right here until you enforce the law."

She dumped herself down on the floor, defiantly crossing heavy arms. After a momentary hesitation, the other women also plopped to the floor and assumed a matching pose. Oliver threw up his hands and whirled to where his deputy had been standing.

"Ramsey, you ..."

Hec was almost to the door, tiptoeing carefully around the sitdown obstacle. He looked back, beamed apologetically, tipped his hat.

"Sorry, Oliver. Duty is a hard taskmaster. Much as I'd like to stay here and learn from your handling of this delicate situation, I realize I am unforgivably late in completing my morning round of potential trouble spots. But I know you will fill me in later on any important points I might overlook."

Before the sheriff could manage a yell, he had replaced the hat, flipped a salute to the seated women and ducked out the door.

A block down the street, Banker Crawford angled across to intercept his progress.

"'Day, Banker Crawford," Hec said and edged out to pass the portly figure.

"Good afternoon, Ramsey," the banker said, without notable warmth, and sidestepped just enough to block Hec's move.

"How goes the usury business?" Hec asked pleasantly. "Dispossessed any widows or orphans today?"

Crawford's flabby jowls tightened, and his pink cheeks took on a dark and mottled hue.

"I don't appreciate your idea of humor," he said stiffly. "Suppose someone should overhear you and mistake your crude flippancy for a



serious statement.”

“Oh, dear me,” Hec said, wringing his hands. “I never did think of that, sir. Do forgive me, sir.”

“Banking,” Crawford continued firmly, “is the lifeblood of this great democracy. And speaking of lifeblood—mine, I’m sure, would flow more freely if I could get some idea of when to expect repayment of that one hundred dollars you fast-talked me into loaning you a considerable time ago.”

“Oh, that,” Hec said airily. “As soon as Joe Baker gets back to town. I told you that before.”

“Every time I’ve approached you on the matter,” the banker said. “The fact remains that I am worried about that loan.”

“Why?” Hec demanded. “You wanted collateral, and you got it. You’re covered.”

“Covered?” Crawford bleated. “What kind of collateral is two sealed envelopes, one signed by you and the other by Joe Baker, and your sworn affidavit that they contain value in excess of one hundred dollars. How do I know you did not swear falsely as to their value. What, I’d like to know, could be worth more than a hundred dollars, yet fit into thin envelopes?”

Hec bent close, after peering around as if spies might be listening. “I’ll tell you a secret, Crawford. Each of those envelopes contains a poker hand—mine and his. But Old Joe passed out, cold as an oyster, before we got done betting. So this is what you might call an ‘arrested game’ until he gets back from his freighting trip to take up the contest.”

“Poker hand?” Crawford squawled. “Betting? And for this I let you borrow a hundred dollars, probably to squander on women and liquor? Where is my money?”

“It won’t get squandered that way quite yet, but I promise you it will be. Just as soon as Joe gets back and acknowledges he’s the loser.”

“I’ve been robbed,” the banker howled. “If he isn’t the loser, where do I collect? *He* didn’t borrow the money.”

“If you can keep a secret,” Hec murmured, bending close, “I’ll let you in on a ring-tailed dilly. All the spots in my hand are exactly the same shape.”

“A *flush*,” Crawford blurted, his eyes round. Then he clapped a hand to his mouth. “By any chance, a *royal flush*?”

Hec tapped a boot toe on the plank walk and smiled at it secretively. “It’s a lovely day, isn’t it, Banker Crawford?”

The banker clutched his arm. “If—if you find you need any more

money to—er—develop your property, drop around, Ramsey.”

“Why, that’s mighty foresighted and progressive of you, Crawford. I appreciate that attitude—so much so that I’ll buy you a steak dinner tonight.”

“May I have a rain check on tonight, Ramsey? You see, tonight my wife’s making my favorite dinner—Hungarian goulash. I don’t get it too often any more, since she got herself so—uh—wrapped up in her church work and civic affairs, such as her S.O.S. activities. But I thank you just the same ...”

“Uh—Crawford, just in case that goulash dinner doesn’t work out the way you plan, the offer’s still open. You’ll find me down at the Mug and Platter, shovelin’ it in.”

“Why shouldn’t it work out, Ramsey? My wife is one of the finest goulash cooks in Oklahoma.”

“Not where she sits now,” Hec said. “I kind of hate to break it to you like this, but you’re a bachelor tonight. Your wife’s in jail.”

“In jail? You’re insane! Why would she be in jail—on what charge, if any?”

“Oh, malicious mischief, wrecking hell out of private property—a lot of charges like that. They’ll be properly listed when you get the bill for damages.”

“It’s a joke,” Crawford yelled, purple in the face. “Where and when did these alleged infractions occur?”

“At the New Prospect Saloon, a little while ago.”

“You’re lying!” Crawford howled. “My wife does not frequent saloons.”

“Well, she sure *un*-frequented the hell out of this one at a little past noon today. In fact, she did such a thorough job, I wonder if maybe you ought to kind of snoop around home and see if you find a bottle hid somewhere. It didn’t quite seem to me what happened could be the work of a plumb amateur. Well, if you get hungry tonight, Crawford ...” He flipped a salute off the brim of his hat and strolled off, leaving one apoplectic banker on the plank sidewalk. Even the worst days had an occasional compensation.

By the time Hec finished his round and got back to the Police Chief’s office, darkness had fallen. Oliver was hunched over the desk at his eternal, and, infernal, book work, the shade of the kerosene lamp tilted to give maximum light on the job. He looked up and glared at his deputy.

“A fine thing, backing me into a corner like that and then running off and leaving me to dig my way out single-handed.”

Hec cocked his head, listening to a keening chorus of female voices

from the cell block, disharmonizing a song about the evils of John Barleycorn. "So you've still got 'em."

"I've still got 'em," Oliver gritted. "Damn your cute hide."

They were interrupted by the crash of the front door bursting open. Banker Crawford burst in, panting, his silvery, thinning hair dishevelled, his tie on one side, and his eyes wild.

"Why Banker Crawford," Hec said. "If you're that hungry, we'll go right over. Somehow, I didn't figure you'd be ready for that steak dinner until later this evening."

"To hell with steak dinners!" Crawford yelled. "Goddammit, we've been robbed, swindled, cheated. That—that Brock Madden cashed a check on my bank for four thousand dollars. He had all the perfect identification, but afterward I couldn't help worrying, so I wired the bank in New Mexico for verification. I just got a return telegram. The man is Brock Madden, all right, but the check is a forgery. His father, old Henry T. Madden, closed out that account to stop his no-good son from forging checks on it. I want that young rascal arrested tonight and jailed until his old man comes through with my four thousand dollars."

"That won't be easy," Deputy O'Connors said, coming in from the back entrance, through the cell block. "Your Mister Madden just hopped the evening stage back to New Mexico—*after* beating one of the girls upstairs over the saloon half to death."

Hec's head came up sharply. "Which girl?"

"Suzie—that cute young kid who blew in from St. Louis a week or so ago. She's too young for that rough business, but I guess when a kid has to eat, she has to eat. And that sonovabitch, Brock Madden, is too well known for the old-timers to take him on—unless they had a sharpened Bowie knife under the pillow. They all agree he ain't man enough to get it up when he's after it. Then he blames the girl for what he can't do, and beats the livin' hell out of her. If anybody catches that bastard, all I ask is give me maybe ten minutes with that creep. I was really nuts about that Carla he mauled last time."

"Granted," Hec said, reaching for his hat. "I'd better see if the poor kid needs help or medical attention. I'll see you in a little while ..."

"You'll see me right now, damn you," Oliver barked. "As I understand it, the county happens to be paying you solely to serve as a deputy chief, not a whore's nursemaid." His dark eyes glinted with unconcealed malice. "And as a Deputy Chief, you're going to be taking the sunrise stage to New Mexico, and you will be expected to bring back either Banker Crawford's four thousand dollars or Brock Madden, or both." He turned to Jason Crawford. "Does that ease your mind a trifle, sir, knowing that our best man will be on the trail of the stolen

money as well as the scoundrel responsible?"

"I suppose so," Crawford said sourly. "At least, with him out of town we might have a chance of some normal, decent home life again. And since you place this one in charge of recovering my money, I presume I'll have to be satisfied with your judgment."

"Gee, thanks loads," Hec said.

## Chapter Three

A stranger, encountering Jason Crawford on his way to open the bank in the morning, would never suspect he was seeing a man burdened down with incalculable woes. There was no hint of the true situation in the familiar front he revealed to the townsfolk.

He had the same big, empty banker's smile for important customers, and the same glacial nod to mere acquaintances. But if his walk was as brisk as always, it was paced to the thudding of an inner drum whose beat repeated, "Four thousand dollars! Four thousand dollars!" At intervals the beat changed to, "Wife in jail! Wife in jail!" then to, "Bill for damages! Bill for damages!"

There was only one tiny thread of hope to ease his burden. Much as he disapproved of Hec Ramsey as a social asset to the community, his honesty forced him to admit that, as a deputy, Ramsey had displayed exceptional abilities. Now Ramsey was on his way to New Mexico, and the banker's chance of recovering his money was better than average. The thought buoyed him until he happened to glance across the street and see the New Prospect Saloon, whose shattered windows and padlocked doors reminded him sickeningly of the costs *that* situation portended.

He started to turn his face resolutely away, when the sound of a window opening from that direction caused a classic double-take. The window proved to be in the notorious second floor of the saloon, and the man leaning through the opening to wring out a very wet towel was unmistakably Hec Ramsey.

Hec finished wringing the towel, flapped it to get rid of excess moisture drops, spied Banker Crawford across the street and greeted him with a casual salute, marked by a waggling of all fingers on the saluting hand. He gave the towel a final flap and vanished from the window.

Crawford blinked his bulging eyes and closed his mouth with a snap that set it into grim lines. Whirling, he set off at a gallop for the sheriff's office. Older citizens reported in some awe that this was the first time they had ever seen Banker Crawford *running*, and certainly the first time they had ever heard him using *that* kind of language, even to himself. He charged into the sheriff's office like a berserk tornado.

"That Deputy Hec Ramsey—I want him arrested and locked up. I'll prefer enough charges to see that he remains locked up until his

grandchildren have grandchildren.”

“Calm yourself, Mister Crawford,” Oliver bleated, shooting to his feet behind the desk. “Now, just try to relax and take it easy while I get you a glass of cold water ...” He froze for a moment. “Did you say, Deputy *Ramsey*? But—but, he’s on his way to New Mexico to take care of *your* business. He left more than an hour ago, equipped with an arrest warrant for the rascal who swindled you.”

“The hel—heck, he did,” Crawford yelled. “Then how come I saw him, less than five minutes ago, leaning out a window of that—*that* place upstairs over the New Prospect Saloon. Not only did I *see* him, but he acknowledged my presence on the sidewalk outside by *waving* to me ...” He demonstrated with pudgy fingers. “... like *this*.”

“Oh, dear.” Oliver said, suppressing an instinct to wring his slender hands. “Are you *sure* ...? Yes, of course you’re sure. How—how could you *see* him up there, if I may ask?”

“He opened the window and leaned out, that’s how.”

“*Upstairs*? What on earth for?” Oliver shook his head, his eyes clouded with confusion. “But what was he *doing* up there, Mister Crawford?”

“You and I and the whole town knows what manner of establishment is conducted on that second floor above the saloon. So *what the hell do you think he was doing up there, you silly ass*? Picking daisies? When I saw him, he was wringing out a wet towel, that’s what. And I hardly think he’d been up there taking a bath, when he’s supposed to be on the way to New Mexico.”

“Did he have his shirt on?”

Crawford went through all the symptoms of a man about to have a cardiac arrest with multiplications. He slapped his forehead.

“Good Godfrey, what’s *that* got to do with it?”

“I was only wondering,” Oliver said mildly.

“I want *action*,” Crawford yelled. “And I don’t mean the kind of action your Deputy Ramsey is obviously indulging in when he is supposed to be on the way to New Mexico to recover *my* stolen money. I want real action and I want it *now*!”

“Well,” Oliver said, getting to his feet and getting his hat off the elk-horn rack on the wall. “It appears that your complaint bears looking into. Shall we go?”

“*We*?” Crawford bleated, turning a sickly white. “You mean—*us*—together—in broad daylight?”

“I am under the impression that you are the one lodging a complaint of—let’s see, what is the legal term? Oh, yes—*dalliance* in office, I believe. A very serious offense, if supported by evidence. And

besides, sir, it is not *our* department that has. been robbed of four thousand dollars.”

“But—but—I’m a banker, a trustee of public moneys,” Crawford wailed. “What would happen to public confidence if I were seen going into a place like that—in the *daytime*?”

“Four thousand dollars,” Oliver said.

“I’ll go along and wait outside while you ...”

“Four—thousand—dollars.”

“All right, all right, *all right*. Now I see the kind of monster I created when I voted with the council to appoint you sheriff. Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

At Oliver’s firm knock on the scabrous bedroom door, the unmistakable voice of Deputy Hec Ramsey called, “Come in.”

Oliver tramped in, with Crawford sidling behind, trying unsuccessfully to look like something that had been accidentally delivered to the wrong addressee. At the sight of Hec he straightened and lost his timidity.

“See?” he shrilled. “I *told* you he was here—and with a practically naked female.”

He pointed a shaking finger at Suzie, clad only in a scanty and diaphanous robe, lying on the bed. Hec, seated on the edge of the squeaky bed, was dipping a towel in a tin basin and dabbing gently at her horribly bruised and battered face.

Without stopping his ministrations or looking around, he snapped, “Oh, shut up, you fat little bloodsucking fart!”

“Oliver,” Crawford screeched. “Did you hear what he said to *me*? Did you *hear*?”

“Deputy Ramsey,” Oliver said sternly, in an effort to regain control of a badly-slipping situation, “I was under the distinct impression that you were on an assignment and would be well on your way long before this.”

“Stage is late,” Hec said shortly, without interrupting his activity or looking around, “and walking that far isn’t included in my oath of office.”

“Oliver,” Crawford squealed, “I insist that you take firm action and ignore his feeble excuse. This is sheer dereliction of duty and open defiance, in flagrante delicto.”

“*Mister Crawford*,” Hec said, over his shoulder. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to throw your fat little carcass out that window, ipso facto, per se, and across the board.”

Suzie pushed the towel away and raised her head from the pillow, her blackened eyes flashing.

“What are you two doing here, anyhow? Didn’t the bartender tell you I’m not receiving customers today? If you’re so hot you can’t wait, go to the second door down the hall and knock twice. Her name is Julie. Anyhow, get out! *Get—out!* Even you should be able to see I’m in no mood or condition to receive company.”

“It appears,” Oliver said mildly, “that you already have company, whether you’re in the mood for it or not.”

“Hec came here to help me,” Suzie flared. “He’s no company, he’s a *gentleman*.”

“The county is under the impression they are paying him to help people in real trouble, like mine,” Crawford said smugly.

“It doesn’t look to me like anybody’s beaten you up too recently. What’s *your* big trouble—nobody to hold your hand?”

“Young lady, my bank was just fleeced out of *four thousand dollars* on a forged check. Your—er—benefactor, here, is supposed to be on his way to New Mexico with a warrant for that miscreant’s arrest.”

“As a matter of curiosity,” Oliver interposed mildly, “how *did* you happen to be waiting up here instead of at the stage depot?”

“It’s a helluva long trip all the way to Santa Rita, New Mexico, so when I heard Suzie had a complaint against that same fella, I figured I’d save the county money by killing two or three birds with one stone. He not only committed assault, battery and mayhem on her, but he ran off without leaving the customary five bucks on the dresser, which is an added felony charge. So, if he was cute enough to wiggle out from under one charge or another, there’s still this one with a witness to prove it.”

“You’re damn right,” Suzie snapped hotly. “I figure he owes me what he agreed, even if he didn’t touch me with anything but his fist. I earned it, even if I had to earn it the hard way.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure,” Crawford said nervously. He shifted his glare back to Hec. “If I’m not being too personal, do you happen to have any plans for getting back my four thousand dollars? Or is it your intention to sit around here the remainder of the day, consoling this young—uh—lady?”

“Whenever that stage leaves,” Hec said, plucking his hat off a brass knob of the bedstead, “you’ll find me on it.”

Suzie raised her head from the pillow again. “That Brock Madden’s crazy, Hec. You be careful, you hear?” She managed a twisted and battered smile, meant to be seductive, toward Jason Crawford. “Now that we’ve got some things in common, Mister Banker, why don’t you stop up some evening soon and we’ll have a nice, cozy discussion about our mutual financial matters. I’m sure we could each help the



other with problems.”

The banker turned a rich and interesting crimson, ducked deeper into his upturned collar and plunged out the door, almost knocking Oliver and Hec down in his haste.

The stage driver whipped the bundle of reins around the whipstock and bawled, “Santa Rita! Santa Rita, *New Mexico*. All through passengers stay close by, on account of we leave for Roswell in five minutes.”

Hec Ramsey climbed down and stood on the fringe of passengers, looking over as much of the town as he could see. A flag whipped from a pole above the courthouse, and another over the adobe shack bearing the faded sign: SHERIFF’S OFFICE. Down the street a few paces was another sign proclaiming: YELLOW ROSE SALOON, with the usual bedroom windows dotting the second floor. Hec stared at the sign and a prominent Adam’s apple rode up and down his throat.

Directly opposite the sheriff’s office was the Santa Rita hotel, a typically nondescript establishment, with false windows in the upper section of an extra-high false front to give the delusion of three, rather than two, stories. The fact that it fooled absolutely no one was of no great consequence in the scheme of things.

Hec waited patiently until his carpet bag was thrown down from the boot. Then he carried it up the street to the hotel, tramped in and stood at the desk, glaring expectantly around.

The only human presence was a burly, broad shouldered man, sagged out in an easy chair in the tiny lobby, reading a *Santa Clara Griddle* newspaper. He glanced up with mild disinterest as Hec impatiently bellied across the tiny counter to whang a bell on a shelf below.

“Does anybody run this damn place?” Hec demanded.

“I do,” the newspaper reader said. “You’ll find pens and ink right there on the desk and the register in front of you. Can you sign your own name, or do you want me to come up and hold your hand while you sign?”

“I’ll manage somehow,” Hec growled.

The burly man got up and came over, walking with a pronounced limp. He peered over Hec’s shoulder at the register, then whistled softly and shoved out his hand.

“Hec Ramsey. Well, what do you know. This is an honor.”

“Do I know you?” Hec asked, frowning, taking the hand.

“We never met, but I sure know *you*. I was in Tascosa right after you quit running down cattle thieves for the Stockmen’s Association. My

name's Milt Brennan."

It was Hec's turn to whistle softly. "A lot of stuff's gone over the thing since I shook the dust of that town off my boots."

"But they've got long memories, Hec. You left quite a reputation around those parts."

"What were you doing in Tascosa?"

"Riding shotgun for the Overland Company."

Hec whistled again. "Now, that can be what I call a really rough job."

"It was," Brennan said grimly. "It got me a Winchester slug in the hip. The sawbones gave strict orders to take it easy until it healed. That's when I drifted in here and latched onto this job—temporary, I figured. But I guess I got lazy, because here I've been ever since."

"A man's got to eat, and one way's as good as another as long as it's reasonably honest."

Brennan limped around behind the tiny desk and selected a key from a rack of boxes on the wall. He tossed it over.

"Upstairs and on your left. I guess you'll be able to find it by yourself. I generally leave the guided tour for ladies." He planted big fists on the counter. "You figure to be around for awhile?"

"Probably," Hec said, "though I never know."

"It's a rough way to make a living," Brennan said, eyeing the badge on Hec's shirt pocket. "I've got to go out for an hour or so. If you hear anybody ringin' the bell down here, would you mind sticking your head around and tellin' 'em to sign the register and take any room that's got two keys in the box?"

"Will do—but you're taking an awful chance, Brennan. I might get to like the work, too, and beat you out of your job."

"Now I'll worry all the while you're in town," the burly man said, grinning.

Hec's room turned out to be surprisingly large, clean, light, airy and well furnished. It had been a long time since he had seen a bed that was flat instead of sagged down in the middle or flattened off on one side. He set down his bag, hung up hat and coat and went to the open window.

Directly across the street was the sheriff's office, presided over, he had learned on the stage, by a large and touchy gent by the name of Sheriff Bert McCabe. Adjoining was a general store with a wooden awning across the front. Perched on the end of the awning, overlooking the sheriff's office, was a large rain barrel bearing a stenciled notice: "For Use In Case Of Fire Only."

Hec's lips twitched in a faint grin. He drew his handgun and leaned

out the window, loosing three fast, thunderous shots into the air. The echoes were still bouncing back and forth between high false fronts when the door of the sheriff's office crashed open and a big, furious man who could only be McCabe stormed out, waving a shotgun. Hec took careful aim and put his last shot into the water barrel. A stream spurted out and directly onto the figure below. Roaring, the big man galloped toward the entrance to the hotel.

Hec backed away from the window, reloaded his gun, took off his boots and was stretched out on the bed with his eyes closed when the door crashed open and McCabe raged in, snarling. He snatched up Hec's pistol from the table and rammed it into his belt. Hec opened one eye.

"You're a fast mover, sheriff. I'd hardly had time to doze off to sleep before you came busting in."

"You'll get all the sleep you want over in our jail, mister. I'll even hang a special DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door. Get up and get your boots on."

Hec sat up, patting an elaborate yawn, and swung his legs off the bed.

"Uh-uh, sheriff. I didn't come here to snooze in your delightful *juzgado*. I came to help you get a cell ready for one of your esteemed citizens."

"My Gawd!" McCabe roared. "You've got more nerve than a cross-eyed road agent. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

"Ramsey's the name. Hec Ramsey. Lawman from New Prospect, Oklahoma."

"I've heard of a Hec Ramsey," McCabe growled, "but I never heard he was the kind to blow in drunk and start shooting up a town."

Hec stood up. "I'm not drunk—unfortunately. But it does sound like a splendid idea." He opened his bag and got out a pint bottle of Monongahela whiskey. He pried out the cork, got a tumbler from the washstand and set open bottle and glass on the table. "You first, sheriff."

"Not when I'm on duty. Now, if you know what the hell you're talking about, why not share your secret with me?"

"This is good drinking whiskey," Hec said. He poured and downed a hefty slug. "A man of principles can lead a lonely, miserable life, but I suppose you're used to it."

"Get on with it, Ramsey—if you *are* Ramsey."

"Oh, I am. Have been for years, in fact. I came here especially to meet you first, sheriff. We had to meet somehow, so I was merely giving you a break."

"Talk sense, dammit," McCabe rasped.

"Well, now, you wouldn't like it one little bit if I was to come bustin' in in front of your deputies and any visitors you might have and tell I'm here with a warrant—over there in my coat pocket, by the way—for the arrest of Brock Madden."

"Brock Madden," McCabe gasped. "Oh, no!"

"Kind of gets you right here, doesn't it? Well, I'll tell you, all he managed this time was to forge a check for four thousand dollars on our local bank, beat the livin' hell out of one of our girls and skip out a jump ahead of a lynch-rope—and me the one who'd tie the knot."

"So what's new about that?" McCabe growled.

"Maybe the possibles. The bank says it's willing to forget prosecution if it gets its four thousand back. Oh, yes! Plus the five bucks he neglected to leave for the girl he mauled. Now it occurred to me that Henry T. Madden being the big-shot he apparently is, you wouldn't want my warrant spread all over town by your big-mouth deputies and hanger-arounds. That's how come I happened to use a maybe unorthodox approach to get you over here instead of me over there, so we could talk this over in quiet."

"So," McCabe said, "what if I don't play along?"

"The alternative," Hec said, shrugging, "is I'm to haul Brock Madden back to *our* jail—and it isn't, I'm sure, nearly as luxurious as yours. In fact, he won't even get one of our elite front cells. I'm afraid he'll get put 'way at the back where the mushrooms grow. I only hope he *likes* mushrooms."

"You found out so goddam much about us," McCabe snarled, "I wonder if you got any inkling of just how much pure, unadulterated hell Henry T. could raise over a thing like that."

"Oh, indeed I have," Hec said, studying his fingernails. "A real old money-loaded heller, the way I hear it. Well, if my job was so easy, ever'body'd be after it and I'd spend half my life fighting off competition. Bet *you* have the same problem."

McCabe swore roundly.

"Look, Hec. I run this town nice and smooth, and I'd not appreciate any wise guy coming in off the stage and chunking rocks at a stable situation. I'll see what I can do to make your job easier, and I'll appreciate some of the same from you. Okay?"

"Absolutely. But don't forget while you're squeezin' the four thousand out of old Henry T., include the extra five bucks for the girl he hammered the hell out of."

"Speaking of five bucks," McCabe said, "that'll mighty nigh cover the cost of replacing that water barrel you ruined over there."

“I’m glad you reminded me,” Hec said. He pulled the cork from the whiskey bottle, swallowed a deep draught and handed the cork to the sheriff. “Hold this for collateral, and just as soon as I can figure out how to sneak an extra five bucks onto my expense account, you’ll get paid in full.”

## Chapter Four

Sheriff McCabe tramped down the street, into the adobe courthouse, and up to a door marked: JUDGE P. B. SHELLEY. He shoved the door open without knocking, and tramped in. The silver-haired Judge was pouring over a fat lawbook.

Without looking up from the book, the Judge said mildly, "When anyone slams his way in here without knocking, it has to be Sheriff Bert McCabe. And when that somebody storms across without a word and helps himself to my jar of roasted nuts, it means he has a burr under his saddle. So what's the burr this time, McCabe?"

"The same one you're about to feel, Judge," the sheriff snarled, cracking the nuts in his powerful hands.

"That's interesting," the Judge said, looking up at last. "And what, exactly, is the nature of this particular burr?"

"Brock Madden," McCabe said shortly.

"Madden? Oh, dear," the Judge said, slamming the lawbook shut. "Now what has that fine, upstanding young man gotten himself into this time?"

"He beat the hell out of a girl."

"Oh, dear," the Judge said wearily. "Well, pay her off at the going rate for such unfortunates. I believe the standard is five dollars per incident, is it not? Pay her out of your cash fund and the old man will reimburse you, as usual."

"I'm afraid this isn't quite the 'as usual' sort of treatment this time, Judge. *This* girl happens to have a friend who is highly annoyed by what was done to her."

"Then arrest him and throw him into jail. I'll charge him with blackmail and put him away for two years. We've done that before, so what are you so fussed about?"

"*This* friend happens to be named Hec Ramsey."

He waited. The Judge looked up, frowning blankly.

"Is that supposed to impress me, Sheriff? I'm afraid I ..."

"You ever hear of Paladin—have gun will travel?"

"Good God!" the Judge said, closing the book with a snap. "Are you, by any chance, trying to tell me this *friend* is that person?"

"You catch on real quick," McCabe said sourly. "Gunman, smart and tough and deadly."

"Do I detect a quaver of fear in your voice, Sheriff?"

“Detect what you goddam please, but he’s also a lawman, here from Oklahoma Territory with a warrant for Brock Madden.”

“And he won’t accept the customary five dollars?”

“Five dollars—*hell!* He’s here to collect the five dollars, *and* another four thousand Brock stole from a bank back there on a forged check. If he doesn’t get it, Brock is going to the penitentiary and you and I are going back to the salt mines—or wherever the hell they’re hiring has-beens these days.”

“Oh, my goodness!” the Judge shot to his feet “This is a terrible situation. What on earth can I do?”

“What you always do,” McCabe said bluntly. “Get the hell out there and lay it on Henry T. Tell him if he ever expects to see that no-good sonuvabitchin’ son again, except on visitor’s day, to come up with four thousand bucks—four thousand and *five* bucks.”

The Judge heaved a deep and heartfelt sigh.

“If I’d had any idea what the support of the richest man in the area would entail ...” He caught himself and straightened. “You be sure you’re back here where I can reach you when I return.”

“Where the hell would I go?” McCabe demanded. “I’m tied to the old man’s pants pockets, just like you are.” He turned and stamped out, slamming the door.

In the cool of the evening, Hec strolled the streets of Santa Rita, taking in the varied sights of a much larger town than New Prospect. Presently the sound of tinny music drew him toward a large and well-lighted saloon. A large and freshly painted sign above the doors caught his eye. *THE YELLOW ROSE*.

He stopped so abruptly that a man, treading on his heels, almost rammed into him.

“I’m be double-damned,” Hec said aloud.

“Were you speaking to me?” the man demanded truculently as he started to skirt past.

“No, no,” Hec said. “Not at all, sir. Sorry. I was speaking to a ghost—one who’s been dead for a great many years.”

The man tramped on past, then turned to look over his shoulder with the expression of one who expects the worst.

Hec turned then, and pushed his way into the big and busy saloon. He found a place at the crowded bar and a bartender with a shining ebony face hurried over to make a token swipe at the spotless bar-top with his towel.

“Yes, *sir*, friend. What’ll it be? Name your poison and I’ll lay you five to one we have it.”

“No bet,” Hec said, responding to the grin. “If I didn’t expect you to have it, I’d never have come in here. Monongahela whiskey.”

“Now, here’s a man who knows whiskey,” the black man said, whisking a bottle from the back shelf and a shot glass from under the bar. “Like me to pour, sir?”

Hec picked up the shot glass and held it to the light, scowling at it.

“What are you trying to do—wean me? I don’t need any sample. I’ve tasted it before.”

The black face spread into a huge, ivory smile. He snatched the shot glass back and replaced it with a thick water tumbler. Hec poured himself a generous slug, sipped it cautiously, and let it roll on his tongue.

“You needn’t worry, sir. It ain’t watered one drop.”

“I know that,” Hec said. “Now.”

“No, sir. This here is an honest house. Miss Savannah wouldn’t have it no other way, nohow.”

“Miss Savannah? A woman?”

“You never saw her or you wouldn’t have to ask that. She’s the boss of this place. She’ll be downstairs soon and you can see for yourself, sir.”

Hec poured himself another healthy dollop, then shoved the bottle toward the black man. “As one lover of *good* whiskey to another, pour yourself one—er—what do I call you?”

“Thank *you*, sir. Most folks calls me Charlie.”

“Then your name has to be Charles. So here’s to you, Charles. Mud in your eye and warmth in your gullet.”

“Man,” Charles said, sipping his drink, “I always knew if I worked in a first-class place like this, sooner or later I’d meet a *real* gentleman.”

A girl came pushing through the crowd with her gaze fixed on Hec. Her extremely short skirt, plunging neckline and heavy makeup advertised her profession. She wormed her way into the narrow space beside him, a feat that required pressing her lush figure against him intimately.

“My name is Kate,” she said in a breathless, little-girl voice, “and if you don’t buy me a drink I’m liable to start telling you what a nice girl like me is doing in a place like this.”

Hec grinned at her.

“This must be your lucky night, Kate. Charles, an extra glass for the lady, please.”

“A lady, he calls me,” she said in a wondering voice that was not altogether put on. “Don’t tell me I’ve finally met a real gentleman.”



“That’s twice I’ve been libeled since I came in here tonight. One more time and I may sue.”

He poured and handed her the glass. She lifted it in salute, took a cautious sip and made a wry face.

“*Pah!* You call this stuff *whiskey*? It tastes more like flat beer to me.”

Hec chuckled. “You mean it doesn’t tear your throat out, or burn holes in your stomach like the rotgut I notice most of these lads are drinking?”

“It sure doesn’t.” She took another sip. “But I believe I could get used to it and even learn to like it. Why don’t we take the bottle and go up to my room upstairs where it’s quiet and peaceful, and I’ll practice getting used to this stuff.”

“Now, that’s mighty friendly of you, Kate, but the truth is this is my first night in Santa Rita, and I feel I ought to spend it just circulating around to make sure I don’t miss any of the action.”

“Miss the action?” Kate echoed blankly. “That’s a new one. Where you from, mister?”

“Just about everywhere. I’d say. But I started my wanderings by leaving Texas.”

“Miss Savannah’s from Texas, too, but she never told me about men like you.”

“Where is this Miss Savannah person, anyhow?”

“She’ll be down any minute, now. I guess she’s like you, she doesn’t want to miss any of the action, either.”

She finished her drink and helped herself to another. After a moment she dug an elbow into Hec’s ribs.

“There she is now, mister.”

“Huh?” Hec came out of deep thought. “There’s who?”

“Miss Savannah. Just coming down the stairs now.”

Hec turned, showing only mild curiosity, then went utterly rigid with shock. Sight of the tall, handsome woman descending the staircase opened a door of memories he had long resolutely kept closed and locked.

Watching his face, Kate snapped, “Don’t go getting any ideas about *her*, mister. Miss Savannah doesn’t play around.”

Hec ignored her. his dazed stare fixed on the woman as she moved regally through the crowd, greeting men by name. Moving to a poker table, she paused with one hand on the shoulder of a player as she watched the game. Hec suddenly recognized the player as Milt Brennan, the lame clerk at the hotel.

The batwings crashed open and an unkempt figure in filthy

buckskins reeled in and stopped, swaying slightly as he peered around with bloodshot eyes. His hair was long and stringy with dirt, and one of his moccasins had a hole in the toe. The only clean thing about him was the shiny blade of the Bowie knife in his belt. From the thick grease and dried blood on his buckskins, Hec tabbed the newcomer as a bear hunter, probably working on contract for one of the bear-grease factories.

The hunter suddenly discovered Savannah and lurched over to confront her at close hand. He looked her up and down, blinking.

"By God, sister, if you ain't sweeter'n a honeycomb and softer'n a mouse's ear. You're just the kind of woman I need, and it's plain to see you need a real man. So what are we waitin' for, honey?"

He lurched, grabbed her wrist in a dirty paw, and started to drag her toward the door. Savannah came out of her momentary shock and struggled to break the punishing grasp.

"Let go of me," she raged. "Get out of here!"

"Not without you go with me, honey."

Hec was spinning away from the bar, but big Milt Brennan was already out of his chair. In one limping stride, he was at Savannah's shoulder. He broke the bear hunter's clutch with a vicious, flat-handed chop and gave him a shove that sent him spinning away. The hunter staggered, caught his balance and dropped into a crouch, whipping out the deadly knife.

"What I'm gonna do, fella, I'm gonna split you wide open from top to bottom."

"You aren't going to split anybody, friend," Hec said.

In passing the poker table, he snatched up the chair on which Brennan had been sitting. Holding it chest high with the legs forward, he sprang at the crouching figure. The Bowie knife whipped in a glittering arc and sliced off one of the chair legs as if it were cheese.

Before he could raise the knife for another slashing blow, the chair slammed into him with all Hec Ramsey's solid weight behind it. The impact sent the hunter crashing to the floor on his back. Pinning him down, Hec kicked the knife out his hand, then tossed the chair aside. As the hunter scrambled to his feet, Hec retrieved the knife.

"If you don't mind, friend, we'll just keep this in a safe place for you until you're in better condition to carry it."

He turned and sent the knife whipping across to stick in the wall, too high up to be reached from the floor. The bear hunter, shocked into sobriety by the swift violence, stood looking sheepish and fearful of worse treatment.

At Hec's appearance, Savannah had clapped hands to her mouth

and gaped as if seeing a ghost. Now she recovered her aplomb and faced the unkempt figure.

“Tell Charles, the bartender to give you one drink—*one* only. Then you’d better get some sleep and head back for the mountains.”

“Yes’m—and thank you kindly, ma’am. If I hadn’t been so drunked up, I’d have reco’nized you as a real lady.” He tipped his fur cap awkwardly and headed for the bar.

Savannah turned then and faced Hec, her face fully composed and her eyes veiled.

“And thank you—*stranger*.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

She turned to Milt Brennan. “For an old cripple, Milt, you manage to get around mighty fast. Thank you, too.”

Hec touched his hat, turned back to the bar and poured himself another drink. He swirled the amber liquid in the glass, studying it moodily, his thoughts indrawn and remote. Kate studied his somber expression with a flare of exasperation.

“Now that you’ve had your share of that action you didn’t want to miss, maybe you’re ready to try some thing a little different upstairs.” When Hec gave no indication that he had even heard her, she tried her most seductive smile and leaned her half-bared breast hard against his arm. “Just think, you can pour a nice big drink and relax. Why, you won’t even have to wear your boots ...”

She watched Hec’s grimly-set expression, and when there was still no response or reaction, the fixed smile became a pout, then a glare.

“Do you know something, mister? A woman could starve to death waiting for a kind word or a little attention from you. Plumb starve to death—or die of old age.”

She whirled and flounced away from the bar, almost overrunning Savannah, who had come quietly up behind them. Kate gave her a gesture of slicing her own throat, with an angry flirt of the head toward Hec, then went off to find herself a more productive contact. Savannah slipped into the space she had vacated.

“She’s right, you know, Hec. A woman *could* starve or die of old age waiting for you. I learned that the hard way.”

“The Yellow Rose,” Hec said, his expression wary. “Now I realize why the sight of your sign gave me a funny jolt.”

“Only my name isn’t Rose any more, Hec. I changed it, along with quite a few other things, after I got tired of waiting.”

“Judging by appearance, I wouldn’t say you were in any immediate danger either of starving or dying of old age.”

“Some things you learn to live with in time, Hec. I learned to make

my own way. I had to. If you recall, I was only fifteen at the time. I've had a long time to readjust."

"And I was an old man of twenty-eight. Hell, Rose, if you're trying to make me feel guilty, you don't need to bother. I've felt that way for a long, long time."

"You've no reason to feel guilty, Hec. You were a young bull with a need to try your strength and find out just what you were made of. A mere woman simply couldn't offer you enough of a challenge. I came to understand after a while."

"Believe me, I meant to come back, Rose. I never tore a page off the calendar that I didn't promise myself I'd come back before time to tear another."

"But every time you started back, you'd see a rainbow and get to wondering what was at the end of it. Or a mountain you hadn't seen the other side of. Or a river you'd never gotten wet in. I know how it is."

"Once I hopped a freight out of Kansas City, figuring it would take me back. But do you know what happened? Some time during the night they shunted my car off and I wound up in New Orleans. Great town, New Orleans."

"So I've heard. I used to have a Creole girl from there working for me. She was lovely." She hesitated while a touch of color washed over her cheek. "Have there been many—*others*, Hec?"

He massaged his chin, then admitted, "Enough to keep my lips from getting chapped."

Her blush deepened. "You know, that's the first time I ever asked any man that question. Silly, isn't it?"

"I'm flattered—I guess. But—but why me?"

"I suppose a woman never forgets the—the first. She builds a little altar to him in her mind and blesses herself every time he strolls through her memory."

"You're a lot better off with the memory than you'd have ever been with the original, Rose. I've never saved a nickel in my life. In fact, I can hardly afford to even drink in a place as elegant as this."

"I don't own it all, Hec, if that's what you're thinking. I had to take in a partner with money or I'd never even have gotten started. A fellow by the name of Brock Madden. Do you know him?"

After a moment Hec said, "I've heard of him." His tone was noncommittal, but a muscle twitched at the angle of his jaw.

Savannah giggled suddenly. "Do you know, when his old man found out where his money went, he was wild. He cut Brock right off at the pockets."

Charles, the bartender, came over and bent close.

“Miz Savannah, they’s a noisy man down there claims he got robbed by one of the girls. Says she picked his pocket.”

“Here we go again,” Savannah sighed. “I’ll handle him. Hec, have yourself a drink on the house and I’ll see you later.”

When she had gone, Hec finished his drink, threw a handful of coins on the bar, and pushed out through the batwings. A big shadow standing just outside the door put out an arm like a telegraph pole and planted a huge hand on the deputy’s chest.

“Hold your horses, Ramsey. I been waiting to talk to you.”

Hec squinted and made out the shape of Sheriff Bert McCabe.

“If you knew I was inside, why didn’t you join me, with whatever’s on your mind? I might even have sprung for a drink.”

“I didn’t want to bust in on your little tatey-tate with Savannah. Seemed like you was doing right good for a fella who claims he just got into town for the first time. A helluva lot better, in fact, than us local yokels rate.”

“You know something, McCabe?” Hec said coldly. “You’re probably a fine, upright citizen and a sheriff as honest as the day is long. But I’ll tell you something. If I was to pick a partner to spend a long winter in a lonely cabin with, it damn sure wouldn’t be you.”

“That makes it mutual,” McCabe growled. “Old Henry T. wants to see you.”

“Henry T. Madden?”

“How many Henry T’s do you know? Come on.”

“I’ll have to hand it to you on one point, Sheriff. When you tackle something, you don’t let any grass grow under your boots. Lead on, McDuff.”

The house was big enough and splendid enough to house a bankers’ convention. A wooden-faced servant in livery opened the door, hung up their hats on a hall tree and silently vanished as if following a well-rehearsed procedure. McCabe strode to an elaborately-carved door and knocked briskly. A commanding voice called, “Come in, come in.”

Hec almost expected the sheriff to genuflect before crossing the threshold. The big man’s voice was curiously subdued as he announced, “I brought him as soon as he was free, Mister Madden.”

Even a confirmed cynic like Hec Ramsey felt his breath catch at the vastness and lavish fittings of what was clearly Henry T. Madden’s study. One wall was lined with well-filled bookcases. A massive desk occupied most of one end of the room. The ceiling was lost in shadows a full two stories up. Midway, a balcony with a wrought iron railing overlooked the study.

Hec took all this in with a sweeping glance, then gave his attention to the figure seated by the fireplace, a buffalo robe covering his legs. Henry T. Madden had been a tall, erect, commanding figure of a man in his prime and even now, wracked by the ceaseless torment of arthritis and embittered by the pecadillos of his only son, he was still able to bear an aura of wealth and power.

He and Hec studied one another for long moments until Madden growled, "I understand you have a complaint against my son."

"A four-thousand-dollar complaint. Or, to be exact, a four-thousand-and-five-dollar complaint. The five dollars is for a little lady your son saw fit to put dents in before he left New Prospect."

"Don't rub it in, Ramsey. I *am* his father."

"You mean the five hurts worse than the four thousand? I respect that, Mr. Madden."

"Thank you."

"I have the warrant here, if you'd care to see it."

Madden made an impatient gesture. "What is a warrant, anyhow? Nothing but a little piece of paper ..."

"A warrant," Hec said softly, "is every bit as big as the fellow who's serving it."

"You don't look all that tall and fearsome to me, Mr. Ramsey—especially considering the fact that I can snap my fingers and rally a small militia around me here in a matter of moments."

"Oh, I've heard all about you and your own private empire and army out here, Madden, and I'm enormously unimpressed. It's the gold-lined shelter Brock always comes hot-footing back to every time he gets his tail caught in the crack of a log." He glanced up at the shadowy balcony. "Isn't that right, Brock?"

Brock Madden came out of the shadows, glaring down at the lawman. "Somebody told you I was out here, didn't they? You'd never have come looking for me out here if you hadn't been tipped off."

"You flatter yourself," Hec said mildly. "As a matter of fact, I wasn't even looking for you—*yet*. I was looking for a man with four thousand dollars—four thousand and *five* dollars—and in my book you don't qualify. You're only the icing on the cake, son, until I get the money. *Then* you might move up to the top of my grab 'em list." Hec thumbed his chin thoughtfully. "I came here for the same reason you did, to milk your daddy for it. I know you don't have it, because I watched you drop the four thousand on some of the sorriest, dumbest poker playing I ever saw in my life. So I figured if I leaned hard enough on your daddy, he'd pay up to keep me from lassoing his feeble-minded chick."

“Do you realize what you’re saying?” Henry T. barked. “That is plain blackmail, Mr. Ramsey.”

“Mr. Madden,” Hec said, “you have the most interesting way of thinking I think I’ve ever come across. I suppose it comes natural from having the money to throw your weight around everywhere. But I wouldn’t call this blackmail, sir. I’d call it only legal extortion.”

“Mister—Ramsey,” the old man said through clenched teeth, “how would you like to turn up suddenly very, very dead?”

Hec thumbed his chin again. “Well, now that you bring up the subject, I can’t say I’d go for it at all. In fact, I’m real sure I wouldn’t. Of course, from your standpoint, it might be a cheap way of getting out of paying the four thousand dollars—four thousand and *five*, I mean. But it would annoy me terribly, and I do so hate to get annoyed.”

“Don’t be stupid, Ramsey. All you’d have to do is take the stage back to Oklahoma and simply tell them you couldn’t find any trace of Brock Madden. With two thousand dollars tucked into your pants pocket, you could make it sound very convincing.”

“Every man has his price, eh, Madden? That’s your philosophy, I take it.”

“That’s been my experience,” Madden snapped.

Hec turned and eyed the sheriff thoughtfully. “I can understand that, Madden.” He watched a wave of dark color surge over McCabe’s heavy jewels. “What do you think I ought to do, sheriff?”

“I don’t see you got any choice,” McCabe snarled.

“I figured you’d say that, the situation being what it is.” He looked up at the figure on the balcony. “Tell me, Brock. Does Daddy always blow your nose and change your didies when you come slinking home with a mess in them?”

“That’ll be enough of that, Ramsey. Our personal life is none of your concern.”

“I’d say it is,” Hec said quietly. “It’s what gave you a sick sheep for a son. Even now, you won’t give him a chance to talk for himself. Do you know what’s wrong with him? You’ve *castrated* him with your money.” He looked up at the trembling, white-faced figure gripping the railing. “When’s the last time you ever got yourself out of trouble, all by yourself, Brock. Or haven’t you ever found the guts to do it?”

“What I do is no business of yours!” Brock snarled.

“Oh, but now it is,” Hec said, tapping his breast pocket. “What your daddy sneered at as only a little piece of paper is big enough to say it is my business this time. So get on down here, *muy pronto!* You’re taking a long trip with me, boy.”

McCabe looked at the livid face of Henry T. Madden and reacted by dropping into a crouch, his hand hovering close to the butt of his gun. Hec glanced at him without concern.

"If you're dead set you want to do it that way, McCabe, you can start any time earning the money he pays you."

"Damn you," McCabe raged. "Make your play, Ramsey ..."

Hec glanced upward. "Maybe you didn't hear me 'way up in the clouds, there. I said—*get—down—here—and I mean now.*"

Brock returned his glare for a long moment, then caved in. He turned meekly and stumbled to the spiral staircase that led down to the study floor. Hec whirled on the old man.

"You'd better hope that fancy 'militia' of yours has learned how to shoot straight and true. Because when Brock and I ride out of here, we're going to be riding as close together as two garter snakes in a mason jar, and it would be mighty easy for a bullet to wander into the wrong target."

"Now, just a minute—just a minute," Henry T. said, holding up a restraining hand. "My God, but you're touchy! I was only trying your mettle, Ramsey. I like to know the type of man I'm doing business with. I've got your money. Get this damn robe off me, McCabe."

The sheriff dived across to lift the heavy buffalo robe off the tortured legs. Madden suppressed a groan as he levered himself onto his feet and shuffled painfully to the desk.

"I've been dragged and stomped on by horses, and I've been shot and had my heart quit cold on me. But none of it could ever come up to this damn arthritis." He opened a desk drawer and took out a packet of bills. "Here you are, Ramsey."

"Thanks," Hec said, stowing the money in his pocket.

"Aren't you at least going to count it?"

"I wouldn't do an honest man that discourtesy, Mr. Madden. Particularly after I noticed the five-dollar bill on top of the pack."

"You know, Ramsey, that tongue of yours is very liable to get you hanged some day."

"Very possibly," Hec said, shrugging. "Still, that might be better than living the way some fellows choose to."

His level look at Sheriff McCabe left no possible doubt of his meaning. The sheriff's hand moved toward his gun and then halted while a wave of dark blood suffused his cheeks. Hec edged toward the door without completely turning his back to any of the three.

"Good evening, gentlemen, and thank you for a most instructive visit. Brock, if I were you, I'd take it a little easy from here on. You're liable to wind up catching something you weren't chasing."



He got his hat off the hall tree and went out to where his horse was tied to a hitchrack. Midway back to town, he glanced behind him and was not too surprised to see two riders some distance back. The burly figure of Sheriff Bert McCabe was unmistakable in the bright moonlight. The other rider, then, would undoubtedly be Brock Madden, off the hook once more and ready to plunge into some new trouble.

Hec left his horse at the livery stable and went up to his room. He lit the lamp, replaced the chimney, and got the nearly-empty pint of whiskey out of the dresser drawer. He stood for long moments, staring blankly at the wall, then put the pint bottle back in the drawer and went to sit on the edge of the bed, lost in memories.

Brock Madden climbed on a stool at the bar of the Yellow Rose. Without waiting for an order, Charles brought a straight shot of whiskey.

“One whiskey, neat, Mister Brock.”

Brock clutched the shot glass and emptied it at a gulp.

“Where’d you say Savannah went, Charlie?”

“I didn’t say,” Charles replied coldly, “because I wouldn’t know. When Miss Savannah decide to go somewhere, she don’t ask my permission or tell me where she goin’. She just ups and goes.”

“God damn her,” Brock snarled. “One of these fine days she’s going to ‘up and go’ once too often.”

“You need somebody to talk to, Mister Brock, there’s Kate down at the end of the bar, all by her lonesome.”

“Charlie, you mind your own goddam business. When I want your advice, I’ll ask for it.”

“Yes, *sir*.”

“And hustle up another drink here. No! Instead, bring the bottle.”

“Yes, *sir*,” Charles said, and flinched.

McCabe had pushed through the swinging doors. “Why don’t you ask *me* where she went?”

“All right, where *did* she go?”

“Now you’ve finally got the guts to ask? She went into the Santa Rita hotel, that’s where—lugging a parcel that sure as hell looked like a bottle of whiskey. Whatever that sonuvabitch has, it works.”

The rap on the door was so light that it barely penetrated his hearing. Hec suddenly shot to his feet, snatched out his gun, and tiptoed to the door. He set himself, cocked the gun, then pulled the door open.

Savannah said, “My goodness, what a warm welcome, and here I

am, a one-time desirable woman, bearing your favorite whiskey.”

Hec grinned sheepishly and pulled the door wide. “I’m sorry, Rose. But in my business, a man can’t be too careful.” He took the bottle out of its wrapping. “You never forgot, did you?”

“A lot of things I never forgot,” Savannah said softly.

Hec unwrapped the bottle and held it up admiringly. “You even remembered the brand.”

“I remember more than you do,” she said. “I always like to bring along a little something.”

“Always?” Hec said. “That sounds like a program.”

“Let’s say—*both* times.”

“Were they anything like me, Rose?”

“I’m afraid so. I guess I kept that little-girl hunt for a Hec Ramsey who never showed up. Silly, wasn’t it?” She sat down on the edge of the bed. “Do I detect a twinge of jealousy, Hec?”

“Me? Jealous? You have to be fooling, honey. But I would like to know how you ever happened to get messed up with a road apple like Brock Madden.”

Savannah slipped off her coat and hung it on the rack while she studied her answer. Hec scrimmaged through the room and came up with a lone water glass.

“A fine thing. One glass in the whole blessed room. Do you mind sharing it?”

“At this stage of the game? You must be fooling.”

“So I’m fooling,” Hec said. “But I really am concerned at your hooking up with Brock Madden, a sick thing if there ever was one.”

“Let’s get one thing straight before we say another word,” Savannah said. “When I said Brock Madden was my partner, I meant my *business* partner, and nothing else.”

“Hold it,” Hec said. “If I seemed to be jealous, it was only that I was jealous of his being in business with you.”

“Oh, sure,” Savannah said bitterly. “I understand perfectly.”

“A girl told me once that Brock never touched her with anything but his fist.”

“Then you do know what he is and what he’s like.”

“His old man did worse than just spoil him. He made a gelding out of the poor bastard,” Hec said.

“I know, and it drives Brock absolutely crazy sometimes.”

“That’s understandable,” Hec said. “And so are your plans for that drink you’re holding in your lap—I think.”

Savannah smiled and lifted the glass. “To the man who forgot to

come back.”

Hec lifted the glass out of her hand. “And to the woman who managed to do all right for herself without him.”

She giggled. “Do you remember that time in Austin when we went on that picnic?”

“Do I?” Hec said explosively. “Barton Springs, and the water was colder than a witch’s kiss, but as clear as April dew. Oh, do I remember.”

“And you wanted to go what you called skinny-dipping, and I had a bad cold, and you said ...”

“You don’t have to go in the water, just because you happen to have your clothes off. Just take them off—and you did.”

“And never even went near the water,” Hec said, laughing.

“Tell me something, Hec. Do you still go skinny-dipping?”

“Not since I put that last forty pounds or so around my belt-line,” Hec said, patting his paunch. “I’m not quite the sylph-like model I was in those days.”

Savannah patted his protruding midsection.

“I think it makes you look very distinguished, my good man.”

“I do thank you most kindly, ma’am. You have no idea how badly I needed those kind words to—how do they say it?—bolster my ego. Do you still do it, now and then?”

“Skinny-dipping, you mean? Hah! You couldn’t find enough water around here to wet your toes.”

“Who mentioned water? As I said a long, long time ago, you don’t necessarily have to go in the water ...”

Savannah set the whiskey glass aside and sat with her hands clasped between her knees, staring at the floor.

“You know, Hec, it hasn’t always been as easy as we make it sound. Far from it, in fact.”

“I know,” Hec said gently. “And the surprising thing to me is that you’re not being bitter about it, when you have every right to be.”

“A little sad at times,” Savannah said, “but not really bitter.”

“And not always alone, I’d hope.”

She gave him a thin, twisted smile.

“Oh, now and then somebody comes along and for a little while it looks to be for real, but it never lasts. What about you, Hec?”

“Oh, you know how a man like me goes along, always hoping to win the top prize in the lottery without having to buy a ticket. How do they say it? Always the bridesmaid, but never the bride. That’s the story of my life.”

“Hec Ramsey, you’re a no-good rascal.”

“I’d be no good for any woman,” Hec said soberly.

“You’re telling me?” Her laugh was close to a sob.

“Here,” Hec said, reaching for the glass. “How about another drink of your own good whiskey?”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to get me drunk, you know.”

“If all women were as honest as you, Rose, this could be a beautiful world.”

“It is a beautiful world,” she said, plucking the pins out of her hair and shaking the long strands loose.

“Right now it is,” Hec said quietly, getting to his feet.

## Chapter Five

The first pale glow of the false dawn lighted the eastern sky as Savannah let herself in to the darkened Yellow Rose. After closing and locking the door behind her she leaned against the wall for a moment, almost too tired to climb the stairs to her second-floor room. But the expression on her face indicated that it was happy-tired, a feeling of repletion, the arrival of a cargo of happiness long overdue.

She finally trudged up the stairs and let herself into her room. She had left a lamp burning, but turned low, and her first move was to turn up the wick and let the yellow glow chase back the shadows. As she did so she heard a deep, wrenching sob in a masculine voice. She whirled around as Brock Madden lurched out of the deeper shadows, tears streaming down his face.

"So that's the way it is," he hiccuped. "I'm not good enough to touch you or even look at you. But you can't wait to give it away to the first saddle tramp who hits town and sweet-talks you with a fast line. Well, I'll tell you something. I'm through waiting for a dividend on my investment, damn you."

"You're drunk," Savannah snapped furiously. "You have no business here in my room. Get out of here right now!"

"Oh, no," Brock sobbed. "You aren't going to play that innocent little don't-touch-me act on me again, baby. I've had it, and now I intend to *have* it."

He lunged, caught her in a crushing bear-hug and planted slobbery kisses on her face and neck. Savannah wrenched herself loose and delivered a ringing slap.

"I said, get out of here," she panted. "*Get—out!*"

Brock's expression changed in a flash from sick lust to insane rage.

"If that's the way you want to play," he snarled savagely, "I can play that game, too." His fist lashed out and slammed into her face, driving her back against the wall.

In the next room, Kate was awakened by the crash. Springing out of bed, she pressed her ear to the wall. Through the paper-thin partition she could hear the sounds of scuffling, with panting, moaning and the unmistakable meaty thud of knuckles smashing into flesh and bone.

When Hec came downstairs, carrying his bag, Milt Brennan was seated in his easy chair, staring grimly at the floor. His morning paper lay

unopened on the desk.

“Good morning, Brennan,” Hec said pleasantly.

“Morning,” the big man grunted.

“Does that early stage usually get off on time?”

“I wouldn’t set any clocks by it.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” Hec said, consulting his watch. “I’ll step over to the depot and check on it. Then, if it’s going to be late, I’ll come back and buy you a drink for old times’ sake. Okay?”

“Aren’t you going to say goodbye to Savannah?”

“You don’t miss much, do you?”

“She’s a friend, Ramsey, and a woman I admire a great deal.”

“Then you keep on keeping a good eye on her, Brennan.”

“I said we’re friends, and that’s all. That’s all it ever is going to be, dammit to hell.”

“You’re a good man, Brennan. She needs someone like you on her side.”

“Right now,” Brennan said grimly, “she needs a lot more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—Savannah’s in jail, Ramsey. She killed Brock Madden last night when he beat her up.”

Hec burst into the sheriff’s office with the force and violence of a berserk tornado. McCabe looked up from his desk, his expression cold and hostile.

“What do you want now, Ramsey? You got the money you came here to get—every penny of it.”

“And wired it back to the parties concerned, thanks.”

“You’re welcome—and goodbye. As you can plainly see, I am a very busy man, so I won’t keep you ...”

“I want to talk to Savannah.”

“Visting hours are from two to four. Come back then.”

“I can clear her. She was with me last night.”

“Until two-forty-seven this morning, and the murder took place a few minutes past three. That’s when she went to her room over the Yellow Rose and shoved a pair of tailor’s shears into Brock. Right up to the Green River, Ramsey. Now let’s hear you try to buy her way out of that.”

“You’re keeping pretty close tabs on Savannah, I’d say, for a man who’s so busy being a kept sheriff.”

“I wasn’t keeping tabs on *her*, I was keeping ’em on *you*. You’re the

sonuvabitch who came barging in here, stompin' on everybody's corns and kickin' the crawdads out of my mudhole."

"Do I get to see her," Hec said through his clenched teeth, "or do I get a court order?"

"Well, now, the great Hec Ramsey is a man of power who can do all kinds of things. But one of the things he can't do is get a judge that happens to be nestled all snug and warm in Henry T's pants pocket. If you're planning to take that early stage out, don't let us hold you up."

Hec whipped a chair around and straddled it.

"Then I guess I'll just have to sit here, and we can glare at each other until two o'clock this afternoon. Go right ahead with your important work, sheriff. I'll be still as a little mouse so's not to interrupt your weighty cogitations."

McCabe tried to meet Hec's glare, but after a moment his eyes shifted. He lumbered to his feet and snatched an enormous ring of keys from a nail.

"I'll give you just five minutes."

Hec stood up, drew his hand gun, and laid it on the desk. His manner and expression made the simple move a gesture of supreme contempt. Sheriff McCabe, he decided, was a man who flushed easily.

McCabe tramped back to the cell block and rammed a huge key into the lock. He held the door for Hec to squeeze through, then he slammed and locked it noisily.

"Five minutes, I said."

"You'll have to keep the count for me, sheriff. My arithmetic never was a strong point."

McCabe made a growling sound in his throat and stormed off.

Hec looked at Savannah and it was like a steel hand grabbing at his middle. She had taken a fearful beating. Both eyes were purpling, her nose was askew, her lips were swollen and streaked with blood. There were savage bruises on her jaw and cheeks, and a darkening smudge on her shoulder, just below her neck.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "I thought you were catching the morning stage back to New Prospect."

"That was before I decided to drop around and sort of say 'hello' and goodbye. You know how we wastrels are."

"Oh—Hec." She fell into his arms, stifling a sob. "I suppose if I were a proper lady, I'd be hiding this thing I once called a face and sternly refusing all visitors until it healed—if it ever does."

"I must admit," Hec said, pushing her away to examine her critically, "you don't really look your best. But you did have a rather hard night, I'm afraid. And the feel of you hasn't changed one bit, so I

guess you're really you."

"This would be a beautiful world, Hec, if all men were as honest as you."

"Never mind the compliments. We've got some mighty fast talking to do. Sit down and give it to me straight. Did you or didn't you stab Brock Madden with a pair of shears? And if the answer is 'yes', I'll personally give you the silver medal for the best job of the year."

"That's what they say, Hec."

"You mean you *didn't*?"

"I don't know, Hec, and that's the God's truth. All I can remember is that he beat me unmercifully, and then he started to choke me and I simply blacked out. I can't remember one single thing until I came to and saw Brock lying there, dead, with my scissors rammed into his back. I just don't *know*, Hec."

"There, there," Hec said soothingly. "I take it this was up in your room. He was there when you got in?"

"I didn't see him at first, but then I heard this awful crying. And—then he attacked me like a wild animal."

"Poor kid," Hec murmured, stroking her back. "You say he choked you and you blacked out. How long would you say you were unconscious?"

"I wouldn't have any idea. But it was long enough for someone here to hear the noise and call Bert McCabe. When I woke up, he was there. He said he'd been having a drink at the Yellow Rose and heard the racket up here, but I think someone up here called him."

"So, what do you think finally set Brock off this time? You said your relationship was entirely business."

"He was nothing but a eunuch, Hec—a sexually frustrated failure. I told you—sometimes it drove him completely out of his mind. It turned him into an animal and the only way he could express himself was through violence—beating up the girls he couldn't mate with, as if they were to blame."

"At least that answers one question," Hec said. "But I don't see we've got any problem here at all. You acted in self-defense, pure and simple."

"You're forgetting one little point, Hec. It wasn't just anybody who got killed. It was the only son of Henry T. Madden. That makes a big, big difference in Santa Rita."

"Hell," Hec sputtered. "He doesn't own a judge and jury."

"If you go around betting on sure things like that," Savannah said, "it's no wonder you wind up broke. Henry T. Madden owns *everything* and *everyone* around here. I don't have a ghost of a chance, Hec. So



get on your stage and get out of here, before you get hurt worse. Think of me once in a while—that's all I ask."

"Oh, stop that," Hec said furiously. "What you need is a lawyer, and a damn good one Henry T. doesn't own."

"Try and find one," Savannah said. "But don't make it a lifetime search."

"I'll find him," Hec said grimly. "Just remember one thing, Rose. I'm here and I'm staying here, so you're not alone."

Hec stormed back into the hotel. Brennan looked up from behind the desk.

"Who's the best lawyer in this town?" Hec demanded.

"Jason Manners, across the street and eight doors down." He added softly, "That's why Henry T. Madden bought him."

"Aren't there any lawyers in this goddam town who don't belong to Madden?"

"One," Brennan said. "David Perkins. But that's mainly because he isn't worth buying—yet. He's still wet behind the ears, and still getting up on a chair to dust off his diploma every morning."

"Thanks, oodles," Hec said, turning away.

"Last building on this side of the street. Oh, and by the way, this telegram just came in for you."

Hec slit the yellow envelope, pulled out the flimsy, and read aloud: "Get back here post haste STOP Women still refusing to leave jail STOP Helluva mess STOP Having to put male misdemeanor cases up in hotel STOP Get back here and straighten out trouble you caused STOP Oliver."

He tossed the telegram back. "Mark this undeliverable. I have more important things on my mind right now."

For the first time that morning, Milt Brennan's grim expression dissolved into a broad grin. "Right-o, gov'ner."

The silvery-haired Jason Manners could have doubled for any politician in the land. His hand-pumping was strictly professional, his oily manner straight out of the textbook on how to screw people and win office.

"You have certainly come to exactly the right place, Mr. Ramsey. I am, beyond all question, the town's leading and best lawyer. My background is beyond reproach, and my experience is as broad as the problems of a frontier community."

"Then," Hec said, "you may be just the man to help me."

"I have never lost a case yet," Manners declaimed.

"That's a most comforting thought. Then you would have no

hesitation in taking Miss Savannah's case."

"Oh, I would win it hands down—except for one miniscule problem. The victim just happens to have been the son—the *only* son—of Henry T. Madden. Do I make my position clear, Mr. Ramsey?"

"Crystal clear," Hec said, getting to his feet. "And I must thank you for your frankness. Since you have been so honest, Mr. Manners, could you perhaps tell me if there is any attorney in Santa Rita who is not—shall we say—under obligation to the Madden empire?"

"Only one, Mr. Ramsey. David Perkins, eight doors down on the opposite side of the street. A very capable young man, I am sure, but lacking the stature as yet to be what you so tactfully described as under obligation to the Madden empire."

"If he's managed to even survive without that prop," Hec said, "he must have something in his favor. Thank you, counsellor."

Dave Perkins proved to be a thin, nervous young man in a threadbare suit, wearing heavy glasses that gave him the look of a somewhat confused owl. He gave Hec a limp handshake and slid a tongue around his thin lips.

"An interesting case, Mr. Ramsey. A *most* interesting case. I do wish I had the time to take it."

"But you haven't?"

"I'm frightfully sorry, sir. I'm simply loaded down with legal work. Swamped, to use the vernacular. So you can understand that it wouldn't be honorable of me to take on any case unless I could devote my full time and attention to it."

"I don't know about the 'honorable' part," Hec said grimly, "but I get the rest of the message real clear. Taking this case simply wouldn't be smart, would it?"

"I don't think I understand what you mean, sir."

"Oh, I'm sure you do, sonny. After all, a young man has to keep his fences mended if he plans to get ahead, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yes—yes, indeed. I certainly hope to get ahead and make my mark in this community."

"How long have you been in this town, Perkins?"

"Almost six months. But I intend to settle here permanently. I do indeed."

"I can see that," Hec said dryly, "and the first rule is to always keep your nose clean."

"Well, after all, I pride myself that I have not made one single enemy since I settled here."

"Good for you, son. I'm sure you haven't." He went to the door,

opened it, then turned back to say, “Just out of curiosity, Perkins, have you ever made any *friends*?” He went out, closing the door gently behind him.

It was nearing the end of the afternoon when Savannah heard a familiar voice call softly, “Rose. Oh, Rose.”

She whipped a chair around to the window and climbed onto it.

“Hec Ramsey, what on earth are you doing back there? I expected at least you would come during visiting hours.”

“I don’t have time for visiting, honey,” Hec said, groaning under an armload of thick, leather-bound books. “I’ve got a lot of important work to do.”

“I know,” Savannah said. “You didn’t have any luck trying to get me a lawyer. I expected that, Hec, so don’t try to cover it up to spare my feelings.”

“What do you mean—didn’t get you a lawyer. I just happened to have gotten you the finest legal brain in the whole Territory.”

Savannah’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Oh, Hec. You did? Who?”

“A brilliant man by the name of Ramsey—Hec Ramsey. You might even have heard of him.”

“Oh, Hec, you crazy idiot. What do you know about the law, for heaven’s sake?”

“Lady, it so happens I have spent most of a wasted life either breaking the law or keeping myself out of jail. There is no better teacher than Old Man Experience.”

“How successful were you in keeping yourself out of jail?”

“I’d say about half and half, Rose. But that isn’t so bad, winning fifty percent of the time, when I was guilty a hundred percent of the time.”

“You have no idea how you’ve bolstered my hopes and self-confidence.”

“But this time, Rose, the law is a hundred percent on our side.”

“Oh, great! But this time the law is a hundred percent on our side, maybe, but Henry T. Madden is a hundred percent on the other side. So figure those odds in your betting.”

“Oh, I will, Rose. In fact, I’m going up to my room now to take the whole matter up with an expert—a man named Blackstone, who seems to have invented law.”

## Chapter Six

Two hours of struggling with the alien legal terminology in the law books were all Hec's nerves could stand. Besides, he was anxious to see Savannah's room, where the murder had taken place. Somehow he could not shake off a strong feeling that somewhere within those walls were important clues, facts that could weigh heavily in her defense, if only he could recognize and read them.

The Yellow Rose was open but half empty, its atmosphere grimly subdued. There was no horseplay, no chorus of boisterous whoops. From the low murmur of voices, Hec judged that everyone there was discussing the murder and Savannah's arrest. Behind the bar, Charles went about his duties wearing a woebegone expression, as if he were the one facing trial for murder.

He brightened appreciably at the sight of Hec, whom he respected both as a gentleman and Savannah's staunch friend and defender. To his sharp eyes, their seemingly casual meeting at the bar had convinced him they were old friends from some distant past. Nor did he miss the fact that she had carefully wrapped a full bottle of Monongahela whiskey before departing for some mysterious visit.

Now he bustled over to Hec, bringing the same brand of liquor and a water tumbler. The lawman gave a nod of appreciation for the remembering, then leaned across the bar.

"I suppose her room is locked now, Charles, but I'm very anxious to have a look at it. There may be evidence up there to help her defense. Would you happen to have a key?"

"I'll fetch it, sir. And I'll be hoping and praying you find what you're looking for." He came back in a few moments and handed Hec a plain iron house key. "First on your left at the head of the stairs."

"Thanks, Charles. Keep your faith in her sound. She'll need every loyal friend she can get."

Hec finished his drink, left money beside the bottle and tramped up the stairway. Unlocking Savannah's door, he pushed it open and stopped just inside, his sharp gaze absorbing every detail of the room that was so clearly and unmistakably hers.

It was a rather luxurious and typically feminine room in every respect, from the frilly bedspread to the lace curtains at the window. The furniture was overstuffed and comfortable, the bed large and elegant. Hec was mildly surprised at the presence of a sewing machine and a cutting table of dressmaking materials and tools by the window

where the light was best, with a full-length mirror on the wall beside them.

The curious combination of elegance and down-to-earth practicality should be no surprise, he realized, for it was no more than a reflection of her personality. He took another step further into the room and discovered something on the sewing table that gave him an inward wrench.

It was a framed photograph of Hec Ramsey himself, taken by an itinerant photographer back in the days when, taking the name Paladin, he had dotted the West with his unique business card: "HAVE GUN—WILL TRAVEL". How or where Savannah procured the picture was a mystery to Hec, but it could not have been easy to obtain.

There was only one ugly sight to mar the femininity of the room. On the carpet beside the bed was a large stain that was easily recognizable even though the passing hours had turned it from bright crimson to black. It lay now as a silent indication of the spot where Brock Madden had come to his well-deserved end.

There was the sound of a light footstep, then a muffled gasp from behind him. Hec whirled, his hand dropping to the butt of his gun, then falling away. The girl, Kate, stood in the hall, looking in with wide, frightened eyes a hand clapped to her mouth. She let it fall as she recognized Hec.

"You're not supposed to be in there," she gasped. "What are you doing there, anyhow? This room is supposed to be kept locked and nobody allowed in it. That was Sheriff McCabe's strict order to all of us."

"Well, Kate, you remember I told you last night that this was my first visit to Santa Rita, so I wanted to be sure and not miss any of the sights. This is one of the sights, so here I am. I guess you could say I was curious."

"You're curious, all right. You're—you're downright spooky."

"And you're extremely nervous, I notice," Hec said. "What do you have to be nervous about, Kate?"

"You. I said you were spooky, and you are. You can give anybody the nervous shakes just by staring at them."

"Then I'll try not to stare at you." Instead, he gave the room another probing stare. Then he asked abruptly, "Who has the adjoining room, Kate?"

"Wh-what?" She had, Hec thought, very much the look of a girl torn between screaming and fainting.

"The room right next door to Savannah's," he repeated patiently. "Whose room is it, Kate? Would it, by any chance, happen to be *your*

room?"

He rapped the wall for emphasis. Then he whistled softly, in surprise, and tapped in several places. From the corner of his eye he watched Kate struggling to get hold of herself and force out an answer.

"No," she managed to gasp. "No. Oh, *no!*"

The vehemence of her denial verged on hysteria. Hec let a shrug convey the mildness of his interest.

"It's not immensely important, perhaps, but I think just of curiosity again I'll step down and ask Charles about the room. I'm sure he will know."

Kate was rigid, her fists clenched at her sides, her face dead white.

"All r-right. It is my room. But I can't see what's so important about that. Why should you care?"

"Because," Hec said, turning grim as he tapped the wall once more, "this is as thin as paper. You could hear somebody simply breathing in this room—let alone somebody getting badly beaten up and somebody else getting murdered. Can you claim that all this went on in here and you never heard a sound?"

"Oh, I admit I did hear some noise once or twice. But I'd had an awful lot to drink, and I'd had one of my busy nights and I was dead tired. I couldn't wake myself up enough even to hear what the noise was."

"You could be one of Savannah's best defense witnesses, Kate."

"No, no, no!" She put her hands up, flinching back as if she expected to be struck. "I *couldn't*. I don't want anything to do with it. I'm—I'm frightened to death of courtrooms and judges and lawyers and things like that."

"Kate," Hec said sternly. "Savannah *needs* you. Would you like to see her convicted and hanged because someone she trusted let her down?"

"I won't, I won't," she cried hysterically. "I won't get mixed up in it, I tell you. Now leave me alone. Stop hounding me. I mean it."

"All right," Hec said wearily, his shoulders sagging "But you're holding something back, Kate. There's something you're not telling me—something that could spell the difference between life and death for Savannah. But I think you *will* tell me, sooner or later. I only hope it's not too late." He watched her stumble toward her door, then said sharply, "Kate, where is the ice house?"

The apparent incongruity of the question shocked her into a semblance of control. She spun around, gaping blankly.

"Ice house? What ice house? Are you crazy?"

“You couldn’t keep a corpse twenty-four hours in this hot climate. So an ice house has to be where they’re keeping Brock Madden’s body until they’re through investigating.”

Kate threw her hand to her mouth and vanished into her room with shoulders heaving.

A full and brilliant moon, striking almost straight down from its zenith, made the night almost as light as day. Nevertheless, the skulking figure carefully circled the black cube of the ice house twice before he could accept the obvious fact that there was no armed guard outside. Incredibly, the combination of Madden wealth and McCabe’s arrogant assumption of his own power had conspired to make him careless. Certainly, any simple request to view the body and the clothing would have been flatly turned down. Consequently, Hec had not wasted time or breath in asking permission for this midnight excursion.

The ice house door was not even chained and padlocked. A guard of course, might be inside, but Hec considered it highly unlikely. The combination of the frigid temperature and the body of the murder victim would discourage any but the hardiest brute from spending a night in the place.

Nevertheless, he eased the ice house door open with extreme caution, keeping one hand on his gun, and pausing to listen for a movement each time the rusty old hinges creaked. When he was convinced no one was on guard inside, he pushed the door wide and stepped through it, into the chilly air.

The bright moonlight, streaming in the open door, meant he would not have to depend for his investigation upon the feeble light of the candle in his pocket. The blocks of cut ice were piled ceiling-high at the rear, but, toward the door, where ice was removed twice weekly for the town’s needs, the stack had been reduced to a chest-high platform. The blocks of ice were deeply buried in sawdust to reduce melting to a minimum.

The naked body of Brock Madden lay face down on the sawdust covering the low platform. His boots and clothing, including the leather jacket he had been wearing at the time of his murder, had been laid out on another ice cake.

Hec went straight to the body. The moonlight gave him adequate illumination to make his examination, though not as much as he would have liked. He studied the body carefully for signs of cuts or bruises, but found none he could identify. This was a disappointment, since he had pinned high hopes on evidence that Brock had struggled with, or been beaten by, an adversary of his size or larger, before the

fatal stabbing.

He spent the longest time studying the wound in the back allegedly made by Savannah's heavy-bladed tailor's shears. Two things were immediately obvious to him. First, that whoever had struck the blow had to have considerable strength in order to drive the thick twin blades through the heavy leather jacket and up to the handles in the flesh.

The second conclusion was that the person striking that fatal blow had to have been thoroughly familiar with the structure of the human body and the method of penetrating it for the quickest fatal effect. The point of penetration was just under the rib cage and close to the spine, narrowly avoiding any bones that might block or deflect it. The angle of penetration was precisely right to take the blades up and directly into the heart.

Never in the world could Hec make himself believe that this skilled precision was a matter of sheer accident. Especially, he would never accept that it had been accomplished by a woman of Savannah's slender build, while she was in the process of being savagely beaten and choked. The looming problem however, would be to convince a skeptical judge and jury to share his conviction.

He spent less time examining the blood-stiffened gash in back of the jacket. He finally rolled it up, tucked it under his arm and went out, carefully closing the ice house door behind him. There would, he reflected with grim amusement, be all hell to pay when Sheriff McCabe discovered a piece of vital evidence had been stolen through his own carelessness. Under less somber circumstances, Hec would have thoroughly enjoyed anything that discomfited the big man, who had quickly managed to affect him like a pratfall in a bed of cactus.

There was little sleep, and no real rest, for Hec Ramsey through the remainder of the night. Most of the time he alternated between slugging away at the law books and pacing back and forth across his room, frequently beating himself on the forehead as if the impact would drive the subject matter into his, sluggish brain. A few times he dozed off in his chair from sheer exhaustion, only to awaken sharply in a matter of minutes and go back to his struggle.

Around three in the morning, there was a soft knock at his door. Hec shot out of his chair and was across the room, pulling his gun from its holster, when a familiar voice called softly,

"It's Milt Brennan, Ramsey, bearing a touch of solace and comfort."

Hec threw open the door and managed a tired grin when he saw the bottle of Monongahela tucked under Milt's arm and the water tumbler in one hand.

"You're a blessing without disguise, Brennan. Come right in. What



in blazes are you doing, prowling around at this forsaken hour of the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep, either—for the same reason. Sitting in the lobby, I could hear you pacing every so often, and I knew we both had Savannah on our minds. So I figured a good, stiff drink or three might help take the curse off those last few dismal hours until sunrise."

"You're a godsend, my good fellow," Hec said, bringing his glass from the wash stand as Brennan uncorked the bottle. "Along with everything else, I was too preoccupied to replenish my own stock before the saloon closed for the night."

Brennan poured generously and handed Hec his glass.

"To brothers in misery and worries." He was lowering the glass when he caught sight of the stack of fat lawbooks beside Hec's chair. He whistled sharply, then tramped across to study their titles. "I've heard a lot about you, Ramsey, but I never heard you were a lawyer, too."

"I'm not," Hec said ruefully, "I'm studying to be a forty-eight-hour wonder, but with damn little success, I might say." He added plaintively, "I'm still looking through the books for the law that says attorneys can't say anything right out in plain English."

"Then you're worrying about her constructively, while I'm simply worrying," Brennan said firmly, "and I have a feeling if anyone can save Savannah, it's you. But not with me in your way and in your hair. So if you'll excuse me, I'll fill my glass and carry it back to my bed of nails, leaving the rest of the bottle to a man who'll need it worse than I do before a new day dawns, as the books say."

He filled his glass almost to the brim, then set the bottle on the floor beside the law books and went to the door. Hec lifted a protesting hand.

"You don't have to rush off, Brennan. Sit around a while and chew the fat. I need a break, anyhow."

"So does Savannah," Brennan said grimly. "I think maybe I can catch a couple of hours' sleep, now." He held up thumb and forefinger, perhaps a quarter of an inch apart. "You know, Ramsey, I feel just about *that* much better over her prospects, knowing how deeply involved you are. If you need any help, or want anybody killed, my bedroom is just off the lobby, beyond the desk."

## Chapter Seven

The main business street of Santa Rita was just beginning to stir with the new day's activities when Hec Ramsey came out of the dining room and headed across to the Sheriff's Office. A mediocre but filling breakfast, backed by innumerable cups of black coffee, had given him a new lease on life. Only his red-rimmed eyes and the deep lines of strain etched around his mouth betrayed the effects of his sleepless night.

He pushed open the door and tramped in. Sheriff Bert McCabe looked up from his eternal report forms, started to bark a moderately pleasant greeting. Then he identified his visitor and his expression curdled.

"You, again! What'll it take to get you to go back to New Prospect, where there must be *someone* who can put up with your eternal meddling and messing? I know what you're here for, and the answer is a flat 'No!' Visiting hours ..."

"Are two to four," Hec chorused in unison. "But it so happens I'm not a visitor, subject to those hours, any more. I'm Savannah's duly appointed defense attorney, and as such I have every legal right to visit my client at any reasonable hour of the day and to spend as much time with her as required to prepare an adequate defense. And if you don't like it, don't try to argue with me. Argue with a guy named Blackstone, who wrote the law book."

"Attorney!" McCabe howled, shooting to his feet. "Who in hell appointed *you* an attorney?"

"Savannah did, and the book says it's perfectly proper and legal. So get your butt-sprung brain off that chair-seat and let me into her cell before I kick more than crawdads out of your little private mudhole."

McCabe tried to match Hec's burning glare and failed. His eyes shifted, and his hand checked its automatic movement toward his gun. Swearing under his breath, he got the ring of keys off the wall hook and led the way to Savannah's cell. He relocked the door, pretending not to watch how eagerly she flew into Hec's arms.

When McCabe had stamped back to his desk, Hec seated Savannah on the bunk and pulled the lone chair close.

"I don't have any time to waste, Rose, so I'll have to make this short. Now, I don't want to make you upset, but I have to show you something and get your opinion." He reached inside his jacket and brought out a pair of tailor's shears with heavy blades.

Savannah gasped. Her eyes went round and frightened, and her hands flew to her cheeks.

“My dress-making shears. But—but I thought Sheriff McCabe was holding them for evidence. Oh, Hec, you didn’t steal them ...?”

“Relax honey,” Hec said, giving her knee a comforting pat. “You’ve just told me what I had to know—that these are identical to the pair you had. I bought them last night at the General Drygoods Emporium where you bought yours. I asked the manager the kind you selected and he assured me these were exactly the same. But I had to know for sure, from you.”

“Oh, yes. Exactly like mine, Hec. Seeing them gave me a shock for a moment.”

“Then think hard, Rose, and tell me *exactly* where they were lying the last time you saw them before your struggle with Brock.”

“Oh, dear, Hec. Let me think. After I left your room ... Everything is so terribly confused.” She pinched her lower lip in deep thought, then suddenly brightened. “Of course. Now I remember. Just before I went down to the bar last night, I’d discovered a pulled thread on my skirt. I used the shears to snip it off, and then laid them back on my sewing table by the window.” She nodded vigorously. “I’m almost positive they were still lying there on the table when I came back from your room. That would be only seconds before I discovered that Brock was there, waiting for me.”

“Hmm,” Hec said, frowning. “And that sewing table is on the opposite side of your bed from the spot where Brock died, and some distance beyond. Eight good-sized steps—between fifteen and twenty feet. I know, because I paced it off from the bloodstain around the bed to your table.”

“But I don’t understand, Hec. What does that have to do with—with what happened? Is it important?”

“Vitality important, Rose. Don’t you realize that to stab Brock with those shears, you would have had to break away from him, run around the bed to the table, pick up the shears, and then run back to the opposite side of the bed where his blood stained the carpet?”

“But that’s ridiculous. How could I possibly have done all that when I was being beaten and strangled until I blacked out? My throat still hurts, and you can plainly see the bruises his fingers left on my neck.”

“Exactly. That’s just my point. You *couldn’t* have done it, under those circumstances, Rose. Are you absolutely positive there wasn’t somebody else in that room besides Brock?”

“Not when I came in, because the first thing I did was to turn the light up so it lit the whole room. That’s when I first saw Brock. If

there'd been anyone else then, I'm sure I would have seen him, too. That someone would have had to come in after Brock choked me unconscious."

"You were unconscious, but Kate, just on the other side of that paper-thin wall could have *heard* a third person." He described his meeting with Kate at the Yellow Rose, and her curiously guilty state of nerves. "I'm positive she was hiding something she was desperately anxious to keep from me."

"I—I can't imagine what she could be covering up, Hec. It isn't like Kate at all. She's anything but the nervous type."

"But she's deathly afraid of something now. I'll put some more pressure on her this evening, and the chances are that she'll break and spill it all to me." He got to his feet.

"Do you have to leave so soon, Hec? It get's so lonesome and frightening in here alone hour after hour. Your visits are the one bright spot in my day."

"I'm afraid I must, Rose. Don't forget, I have an important trial coming up tomorrow, and that means that, like all good lawyers, I have to have my case most carefully prepared." He bent and dropped a light kiss on her bruised forehead. "Keep your chin up, honey. I'll see you there."

He stood in front of the jail and peered up and down the street. Sheriff McCabe came out of the office behind him and moved up close.

"It's nine doors down, Ramsey, if you've forgotten where the stage depot is. If you're worried, I'd be most happy to go along and make sure you get a seat on the early stage East from here."

"I can't leave just yet," Hec said, "but I do thank you all the same. What I think I need most right now is a good carpenter or woodworking shop."

"I've got just the one for you. A Mex by the name of Juan Perez at the upper end of the street on this side. Juan makes beautiful coffins. He also carves religious figures that'd tear your heart. That is, if you have one."

"He sounds like the very man I need," Hec said. He turned, grabbed the sheriff's hand and pumped it as if they were reunited brothers. "You don't know how much I appreciate your fine help, Sheriff. In my moment of victory, I shall bless you deeply."

He strode off in the indicated direction, leaving McCabe looking both confused and worried. It gave Hec a great deal of comfort to see that Sheriff Bert McCabe had changed, almost overnight, from an arrogant man to a very unhappy one.

Turning into the woodworking shop, he almost collided with a small, stubby, dark-skinned man on his way out. The man was carrying a box of knives and chisels in one hand and an immense iron key in the other. Both recoiled and eyed one another.

“*Señor Juan Perez?*”

“*Si, señor.* How may I serve you?”

“You’ve been highly recommended as an expert wood craftsman. I have a piece I want made immediately. It’s pretty intricate—*intrincado*—but I understand you can do it perfectly. I’ll pay generously, but it *must* be finished by sundown today.”

The woodcraftsman burst into a flood of incomprehensible Spanish, alternately slapping himself on the forehead and waving spread hands in front of Hec’s face.

Hec waved his own arms and yelled, “*Retardar! Disminuir, por favor!* Slow the hell down, will you, *por Dios?*”

“*Perdon,*” Juan said, slapping his own plump, shining cheeks in contrition. “This English, she raise hell with me one time often. I am fill with regret but today all day I am on job, I promise. Maybe tomorrow be okay, *señor?*”

“Tomorrow,” Hec said grimly, “may well be too late to save a lady’s life,” He dug into a pocket and pulled out a fat wad of bank notes. “I’ve tried to be damn near everything else, including a lawyer, so I might as well tackle woodworking. How much for the use of your shop and tools for just the afternoon?”

Twenty minutes later Hec, his shirt and jacket off, was glaring blankly at a large workbench with a fantastic assortment of tools and stacks of seasoned wood. The slashed and bloody leather jacket from Brock Madden’s corpse was spread open on the bench beside him, a tape measure open across it. It had been long years since he had puttered at woodworking, but as he plunged into his vital task, some of the old knack and knowledge of tools began to come back to him. While the finished product might not win any handicraft prize, it might be adequate to perform as it was intended—to refute the ugly charges against Savannah.

It was close to sundown when Juan Perez burst in the back door, sweating and weary from his hot day’s work. He stopped to bathe his glistening face in the tub where his cutting tools were quenched after grinding, then he trotted on in, blowing like a porpoise. Hec was just rolling down his shirt sleeves and putting on his jacket.

“How you do today, *amigo?* I hope you about finish’ maybe. My big, fat, too-strong wife, she tell me long ago, Juan, either you lock up the place and come home for supper when supper is ready, or I don’t give you any supper nohow. So, is now supper time.”

“Here’s your key,” Hec said, tossing it over. “Start locking up. My job is finished, to the best of my ability, anyhow.”

On the bench before him was a somewhat crude but easily-identifiable wooden replica of the skeleton of a human male torso. Juan circled from side to side, squinting at the strange object and scratching his head.

“Por *Dios, señor*, that is one crazy-damn-looking whatever it is. You sure this is what you want when you pay good money for use of my shop? Maybe you wake up sober tomorrow and come want your money back. I tell you now, when I get home tonight my big wife take all money I have, so you ain’t got one chance.”

“The money is still yours to keep,” Hec said, with a lopsided grin. He brought the rolled-up leather jacket over and fitted it around the framework that had been painstakingly cut to the exact measurements taken from the inside of the garment. Juan studied the result, clucked sadly and shook his head. He pointed to the knife slash below the left shoulder blade.

“That hole, she don’ look so good, *señor*. Maybe when you leave you ought to stop at the Emporium and get some thread and a needle to sew it up. You do a good job and maybe she don’t show and you can get good price for jacket. But I tell you one other thing, *señor*. Better you wash it all off good, too. Somebody, I think, spill chili all over by that slash, and that ain’t good for business, whatever you’ business.”

“It could be just what the doctor ordered for my business, Juan, but thanks anyhow for the suggestions. You’ve been a lot bigger help to some people in trouble than you’ll ever know.” Hec stood back and gave his handiwork a final critical inspection. “A good job, if I do say it myself. Convincing. Mighty convincing.”

“That word I do not know, *señor*, but I think maybe it mean *loco* in English.”

The sun had set, and deep shadows were filling the street between the high false fronts of the business buildings, when Hec left the woodwork shop. At the hotel, Brennan was nowhere in sight. Probably, Hec thought with deep sympathy, he was catching up on a little sleep at last.

He stowed the results of his afternoon’s craftsmanship, along with the purloined leather jacket, in the tiny closet and went out again, locking the door behind him.

At the Yellow Rose, he flicked a salute to Charles, nodded to a handful of acquaintances among the regulars, and went up the stairs to the second floor. At the door to Kate’s room he rapped gently, waited through a long silence, then rapped again more imperatively. When there was still no response, he tried the knob and was faintly

surprised to have the door swing open at his touch.

The room was small, nondescript, a counterpart of tens of thousands of its kind in backwaters of the nation—its principal furnishings the tools of the occupant's trade. There was not even a closet. Her small, pathetic wardrobe hung on pegs on the wall behind a sleazy dust-cover. There was no Kate, nor was there any spot where she might hide.

Hec backed out, closing the door. Midway down the stairs he stopped to survey the barroom. It was a little more active than it had been on his earlier visit, but the pall cast by Savannah's misfortune and the murder was very evident in the subdued voices and notable lack of boisterousness. Two or three of the other girls from the second floor were hustling the customers, but even their counterfeit seduction lacked spirit. Nowhere was there a sign of Kate.

Hec went on down and found space at the end of the bar. Charles hurried over, bringing bottle and glass.

"Evening, Mister Ramsey. I hope you've been making some progress with what you're trying to do."

"Tomorrow will tell whether I have or not, Charles. I'm coppering my bets right now. Do you know where I could find Kate?"

"Why, she must be around here somewhere. She always is, unless she's got a customer." He craned his neck to search the crowd close at hand, then he stepped up onto an upended beer keg to see the further reaches of the big room. He hopped down, his forehead wrinkled in a scowl of bewilderment. "That sure is funny, Mister Ramsey. Maybe she's up in her room yet, but this is her busiest time down here."

"She isn't. I tried her room first."

"Then I couldn't have the faintest idea where she might have gone. It just ain't like Kate to simply up and disappear this way."

"Have you any idea how long she's been gone?"

"Let's see ..." Charles scratched his head, pondering. "I know she was down here around noon, because I served her one of her drinks. But I can't recall noticing her after that." His expression of worry deepened. "You don't suppose she could be in her room, sick or unconscious, so she couldn't answer your knock?"

"She isn't. Her door wasn't locked so I opened it and looked in, with the same idea. Her room was empty."

"Oh, Lordy," Charles muttered. "I sure hope Kate ain't in some kind of bad trouble that could make her run off like this without a word."

"It's Savannah who's in the bad trouble, Charles—trouble *she* can't run away from. And it's trouble that's liable to get a whole lot worse if Kate isn't here to help her. If she does show up, send someone over to

let me know right away. I'll be in my room at the hotel all evening."

"You can depend on that," the black man said fervently. "But I get what some folks call 'hunches' once in a while, real strong. I got one like that now and it ain't a happy one a-tall. It keep tellin' me Kate ain't gonna come back."



## Chapter Eight

The trial of Savannah for the murder of Brock Madden was the sensation of the Territory. Consequently, the Santa Rita courtroom's spectators section was jammed full, with not even standing room left around the walls. At least as many more of the curious milled outside, each secretly nourishing the remote hope that one of the more fortunate ones within would faint or drop dead or suffer some kind of seizure sufficiently severe to vacate a seat.

The front rows of the spectators' section were largely occupied by people with a more-than-casual interest in the proceedings and their outcome. Side by side in the very front row were Milt Brennan and Charles, the black bartender, openly demonstrating their loyalty to Savannah. Among those taking an opposite stand, the one most glaring exception—Henry T. Madden, himself—was conspicuous by his absence.

Beyond the railing, the participants in the trial formed a smaller crowd, all grim-faced and tense. At facing tables on opposite sides of the Judge's bench were the principals. On the left, Savannah and Hec sat side by side at the defendant's table. On the right, County Prosecutor Al Spooner occupied a table almost buried under stacks of paper, scratch pads, pencils and a large, closed case that presumably contained relevant items. In contrast, Hec had only a few sheets of scribbled notes before him.

At a smaller table, the court clerk had laid out his pads and pencils. Seated beside him was Sheriff Bert McCabe. Two heavily-armed deputies were posted inside the railing, one at either side of the room, on the alert for anyone who might attempt to get close to Savannah for purposes of either rescue or revenge.

The clerk suddenly leaped to his feet and waved his arms in a lifting motion, and everyone obediently stood up, as Judge John Shelley climbed to his chair behind the bench, adjusted his black robe, and sat down. The clerk reversed his hand-motions and everyone dropped back to his or her seat.

Judge Shelley banged his gavel authoritatively.

"The defendant has requested that she be allowed to conduct her own defense—through the person of one Mr. Hec Ramsey. That permission has been granted by the court. I explain this so that all present may know that this court is giving her every opportunity provided by the laws of justice." He paused. Then he leaned out to

look down at Hec Ramsey. “Mr. Ramsey, since you are not a lawyer, I must ask if you are familiar with the basic forms of court procedure, since it would be unpleasant to have any interruption to the established patterns during this trial.”

“I am quite sure so, your honor,” Hec said, standing. He added dryly, “Since I have been present at a considerable number of such trials, I feel that I am qualified to follow the pattern of procedure I have watched through the past.”

“Very good,” Judge Shelley said, and banged his gavel again. “This court will now hear motions.”

Both Hec and prosecuting attorney Spooner got to their feet.

“For the prosecution, Mr. Spooner?”

“No motions, Your Honor,” Spooner said, and sat down.

“For the defense, Mr. Ramsey, speaking in lieu of an attorney.”

“Well, yeah,” Hec said, consulting his notes. “I guess I’ve got quite a lot of them here. Shall I get them off my chest?”

“Proceed, please,” Judge Shelley said, straight-faced.

“Well, first off, we want a change of venue. And on top of that, we want this court to disqualify itself in this case.”

“On what grounds?” the Judge asked.

Hec stared up at him for a long and pregnant moment. “Are you sure you really want me to go into that in detail, Judge?”

“Motion denied,” Shelley said hastily.

“Exception,” Hec said.

“Exception denied.”

“Completing this portion of my evidence,” Hec snapped. He whirled and pointed a stubby finger at the court clerk. “You, over there, Clerk—are you getting all this exchange down on your paper exactly as it’s been spoken? Because I expect to need every word of it later, in case I might want to challenge any of the rulings.”

“Proceed, Mr. Ramsey. Perhaps your legal talents may have been underestimated.”

“Next,” Hec said, after a glance at his notes, “we move for a continuance in order to produce a very important witness.”

“If your witness is so important,” the Judge said, “why is that witness not present now?”

“I’m dam—er—blamed if I know. She’s suddenly disappeared, which puts one helluv—heck of a crimp in our whole defense case. That’s why we need extra time.”

“This court,” Judge Shelley said pompously, “cannot grant a continuance willy-nilly, simply to wait for the reappearance of a

witness whose existence may even be wholly mythical. Motion denied.”

Hec whirled and levelled a finger at the clerk, “Exception! Make blame sure you got that down.”

“Please proceed, Mr. Ramsey,” the Judge said sharply.

“All right, all right. I’ll try another one on, just for size. How about entertaining a motion to reduce the charge from murder in the first degree to manslaughter, on the basis of factual evidence to be presented later in this trial?”

“Motion denied.”

“Exception again,” Hec snapped over his shoulder.

“Kindly proceed, if you have more.”

Hec started to speak, then gritted, “Aw, what in blazes is the use?” He rammed the remaining notes into his pocket and snapped, “Let’s get the jury picked and get along with the trial. Maybe if I talk sense to them, *they’ll* understand.”

During the tedious, yet vital, process of selecting the jury, Hec devoted every free moment to making a sweeping, detailed study of the spectators. Finally, in an end seat near the back, he saw a work-worn woman in threadbare dress who almost exactly met the specifications in his mind.

“You’re wonderful, Hec,” Savannah whispered, bending toward him. “You couldn’t have made a better appearance as a lawyer if you’d had years of legal training.”

“Honey,” Hec said, a trifle grimly, “don’t ever compliment a woodsman on his tracking ability until you’re really *out* of the woods.”

Judge Shelley, who had been squirming restlessly for some time, abruptly banged his gavel.

“The court declares a twenty-minute recess. Please see to it that you are all back in your places by the end of that period of time.”

Hec flung a word to Savannah, then shot from his chair, through the gate and down the aisle before most of the spectators had gained their feet. He caught up with the woman he had selected, as she stood up and moved out.

“Ma’am, I’d like a moment or two of your time to speak to you privately outside. I’m Hec Ramsey ...”

“I recognize you, Mr. Ramsey,” she said, studying him candidly. “You’re defending that poor woman who’s on trial. I saw you staring at me from time to time and wondered why. I’m just a poor widow, struggling to keep body and soul together with hard work and hope. What could I possibly do for you—or her?”

Hec took her elbow, steering her off to one side of the corridor,

away from the crowd pushing its way outside for one quick drink, or at least a stretch of cramped muscles. Seen at close hand, she was even more work-worn and impoverished in appearance than she had seemed from a distance. It was all to the good, so far as his scheme was concerned.

Mrs. Lambert, as she identified herself, listened with eyes wide and mouth open as Hec explained exactly what he wanted her to do in court. They flew even wider when he added,

“If you can succeed, Mrs. Lambert, I will then and there lay three hundred dollars in your hand to keep and use as you see fit. But if you fail, I’m very much afraid you’ll get nothing but our heartfelt thanks. Are you willing to make the test for me on those terms, accepting it as an all-or-nothing gamble?”

“I need the money too bad not to try my best, Mr. Ramsey. You can depend on me. But I warn you, rubbin’ heavy, wet workclothes on a washboard from dawn to dark doesn’t put milkweed juice in a person’s arms in place of muscle. You’re going to lose that three hundred dollars—unless there’s some trick you ain’t told me about.”

“No trick,” Hec assured her. “Everything will be exactly as I described it. And if I lose, I’ll figure the money couldn’t have gone to anyone more deserving.”

From inside the courtroom came the reedy voice of the clerk, serving as bailiff, shrilling, “*Time! Time!* Ever’body in their places and quiet down. Doors’ll be locked in exackly two minutes.”

“Run on in, Mrs. Lambert. I’ll join you as soon as I pick up an important bundle I left outside.”

Hec got in moments before the outer doors were slammed and bolted. He was carrying a bulky object wrapped in a sheet from the hotel. Picking up Mrs. Lambert at her seat, he hustled her to a chair at the Defense table. Savannah stared at the new arrival, but her growing trust in Hec as a defender kept her from asking questions.

From the side of his mouth he whispered, “No matter what you think or feel in the next few minutes, Rose, don’t blink an eye or act startled or upset.”

Judge Shelley banged his gavel. “Is the Defense ready to proceed?”

“It is, Your Honor,” Hec said, getting to his feet. “Your Honor, Gentlemen of the Jury—the Defense has prepared a little demonstration here that we feel certain will prove, beyond the slightest shadow of doubt, the innocence of the defendant.”

“Proceed, Coun—er—*Mister* Ramsey.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. Mrs. Lambert, would you please step up beside me here.” When she was standing at his side, he turned to the

jury again. “Mrs. Lambert, as most of you probably know, is a fine, Christian widow lady who has, let us hope momentarily only, fallen upon hard times. She had absolutely no involvement of any nature in the case you are to decide. She merely agreed to aid me in a simple demonstration, about whose purpose she has not even been told. If she can successfully perform the task I asked of her, I have promised to give her three hundred dollars in cash ...”

Hec pulled out three hundred-dollar bills, fanned them out in his hand, and held them to all directions for both jury and spectators to see and identify. There were several gasps of surprise or respect.

“To insure that Mrs. Lambert will try to the fullest extent of her ability to succeed in this test, she understands that if she fails, she gets nothing whatever. True, Mrs. Lambert?”

“Too true,” she muttered in a barely-audible voice.

“Now, will the defendant please join us here.” As Savannah, looking completely blank, got to her feet, he pointed. “I’d like for you to stand there, right next to Mrs. Lambert.” He turned to the jury. “Will the jury please take a good look at these two ladies? You will observe that, physically, they are very close to being identical—same height, same approximate weight, I’d judge, and same general build—although I’d concede Mrs. Lambert an edge in the area of muscles. Agreed, gentlemen?”

He was gratified at the raptness of their attention and the fact that several of the jurors nodded in solemn agreement. He gestured for Savannah to return to her seat, then turned his attention to the bundle he had brought to the table. Flipping back one end of the sheet, he lifted out his painstakingly manufactured model of the body section of a human skeleton. Gasps from a few spectators and two or three jurors were unintended compliments to the realism of his workmanship.

“What we have here is a crude replica of the torso section of a male skeleton. While I wouldn’t claim any art prize in the field of sculpture, I do guarantee that this has been made to the precise physical measurements of the late Brock Madden.”

A louder chorus of gasps, interspersed with exclamations, caused Judge Shelley to pound his gavel and roar, “*Order! Order!* Silence, please!”

Hec turned back the remainder of the sheet and brought out the rolled-up leather jacket he had stolen from the ice house on his nocturnal excursion. Unrolling the garment, he took out the tailor’s shears he had purchased. Laying these aside, he held up the jacket for all to see the blood-smeared gash in the back.

Sheriff McCabe shot to his feet, his big face darkening with rage.

“You son of a bitch! So *that’s* what became of ...”

He was interrupted by the pounding of the gavel and the outraged bellow of Judge Shelley, “*Order! Order!* Sit down. Any altercation you have with Mr. Ramsey will take place later and outside this court. And hereafter, kindly watch your language.”

McCabe sank back to his seat, muttering under his breath, but his furious glare portended a stormy future for one Hector Ramsey. Unperturbed, Hec aimed a curt nod of appreciation toward the bench. Then he held up the shears.

“And here we have an exact duplicate of the tailor shears with which he was killed. I’d like you to note, please, that tailor’s shears are thicker and heavier than ordinary scissors, and therefore, slightly more blunt and more difficult to handle. Also, I would like you to take special note of the thickness of the leather in this jacket.”

After displaying the jacket to all parts of the room, he fitted it around the wooden replica of Brock Madden’s torso. Taking a piece of chalk from his pocket, he drew a circle on the back of the jacket, directly opposite the murder slash.

“Are you ready, Mrs. Lambert?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.” She was visibly shaking from an attack of stage fright, and beads of perspiration glistened on her forehead. But she gamely accepted the shears Hec handed to her.

Looking past her to the jury box, Hec continued, “I’d like you to bear in mind that, at this point, the defendant was lying on her bed, having been savagely beaten. Her muscular assailant was above her, pinning her down with his greater weight while he choked her, his powerful fingers producing the ugly bruises you can plainly see on her throat even yet. The shears were lying on her sewing table, a considerable distance away.”

He paused, giving jury and spectators time to visualize the scene in their own minds.

“Now, it is utterly ridiculous to charge that under such conditions the defendant—or *any* woman—could have torn herself loose, gotten off the bed, gone for the shears, come back to the opposite side of the bed, and stabbed her attacker. It is equally ridiculous to say that a large and powerful man, driven insane by lust and rage, would have waited patiently for her to accomplish the impossible.

“But I hope now to demonstrate one other impossibility. To prove my point, we will assume for a moment that she actually did procure the shears without opposition and returned to complete the night’s tragic drama.” He picked up the jacketed torso and held it tightly against his chest, with the back toward the waiting widow. “For three hundred dollars, Mrs. Lambert, all you have to do is stab through the jacket at the point I’ve indicated by the circle. Go ahead.”

She set herself, raised the shears high and drove them at the jacket point—first with all her considerable strength. The point struck within the circle, but the stout leather resisted like a suit of armor.

“Try again, Mrs. Lambert.”

She struck again with the force of desperation in the blow. Again the shears failed to penetrate to the extent of even a pinhole. Mrs. Lambert stood panting, almost in tears.

“I—I *can’t*, Mr. Ramsey. I tried with all my might. Truly I did, but they simply wouldn’t go through.”

“You did your best, Mrs. Lambert,” Hec said, taking the shears from her limp hand. “You may go back to your seat. I’m sorry all you take with you are our sincere thanks for your efforts.”

Shoulders slumped, she sank into her chair beside Savannah at the defense table and put her face in her hands. Still carrying the jacketed frame and shears, Hec walked to the jury box.

“Take a good look, gentlemen. Convince yourselves that this jacket is completely uncut—positive proof that the defendant, using all her strength, could not possibly have inflicted even a slight bruise on the back of Brock Madden.”

He gave them plenty of time to study and finger the exhibits, then brought them back to the table. Facing the bench he said,

“The defense rests, Your Honor.”

Shelley banged his gavel.

“Court is recessed for thirty minutes.”

Hec finished rewapping the exhibits in the covering sheet. Still slumped in her chair, Mrs. Lambert suddenly straightened up, her face mirroring shock and horror.

“Oh, good heavens! I—I never realized ... I didn’t think ...”

“What is it?” Savannah asked sympathetically. She laid a hand on the widow’s trembling arm. “What’s wrong, dear?”

“Oh, how could I have been so selfish?” Mrs. Lambert cried, her hands to her face, tears starting down her cheeks. “I’m *so* sorry ... I—I needed that money so bad it was all I could think of then. I never stopped to realize that if I *had* succeeded, it might have proven you were guilty. And there I was, trying—*really* trying my very hardest ...”

“But you didn’t succeed,” Savannah murmured soothingly, patting the widow’s heaving shoulder.

“Thank God I didn’t. Oh ... thank God!” She got to her feet, sobbed, “Please, *please* forgive me,” and stumbled through the gate and down the aisle toward the doors.

“I’d been wondering how long it would take her to figure that out,”

Hec said. He snatched up the three hundred-dollar bills. "Be back in a minute, Rose." With the memory of her warm, approving smile, he plunged through the gate and galloped in pursuit of Mrs. Lambert.



## Chapter Nine

Judge Shelley banged his gavel and announced, "This court is now in session. Is the prosecution ready?"

"Ready, Your Honor," Spooner said, getting to his feet.

"Then proceed, Mr. Prosecutor."

"Gentlemen of the jury," Spooner began in a sonorous voice as he faced the jury box, "let me relieve your minds of one fear right at the outset. The prosecution has neither the intention nor the need to submit you to any such insulting, degrading and emotional displays as those inflicted upon you by the defense. I have far too much respect for your intelligence, for your ability to judge evidence rationally and without passion. In consequence I shall be very brief ..."

"I only hope he means it," Savannah murmured, her face revealing the strain of her ordeal.

"He does," Hec said. "He's only got one thing to lean on, but it's the one thing we can't fight against."

"What's that?"

"You'll find out soon enough," he said grimly.

Spooner stepped close and leaned his hands on the railing of the jury box. Thrusting his head forward, he dropped his voice to an intimate, confidential pitch.

"I shall submit to you only three or four points, but all are vital to this case. Number One is the defendant's profession, with which I am sure you are all familiar. I am equally sure you will agree that it is not noted to be one of high moral rectitude."

Hec's lips tightened to a grimmer line at the sight of two or three jury members unconsciously nodding agreement. It was no accident that had placed Spooner in his post. The man, Hec silently admitted, was good.

"Number Two," the prosecutor continued, letting his controlled voice regain more volume for the benefit of the spectators, who also happened to be voters. "Although of course he had no connection with its operation, it is common knowledge that Brock Madden was a part-owner of the Yellow Rose Saloon by virtue of having invested a sizable amount of money in it. Now, what better motive than that could we find for one partner to eliminate the other and thus become the sole owner?"

Savannah gave an angry gasp and started from her chair. Hec

quickly put out a hand to restrain her. He pushed her back down with gentle firmness.

“Easy, Rose. Take it easy. You’ll hear worse than that before this thing is over, so hang onto your control.”

“Number Three,” Spooner was continuing smoothly, after a sly side-glance to see how his quarry was reacting, “is the murder itself and how it was accomplished. Nothing could be more simple, gentlemen. The real purpose of that outrageous demonstration by the defense a short time ago was to divert your attention from the plain and obvious truth.

“Of course she doesn’t have the strength to stab the shears through that leather jacket. But she didn’t *need* that strength—because she stabbed Brock Madden *under* the bottom of that short jacket. Then for a few dollars she got some man—quite possibly her bartender, Charles—to come up and jam the shears through the jacket, smear the cut with her victim’s blood, and even mark up her face and neck to heighten the illusion. Self-defense, my eye!”

Hec shot from his chair. “Objection, Your Honor.”

Beyond the railing, Charles was on his feet, shouting, “That’s a dirty lie! I can prove where I was every minute of that ni ...”

Shelley almost broke his gavel pounding the bench. His face was mottled with the hot blood of his anger.

To Charles he barked, “Any more such outbursts from you and I shall have you forceably removed from this courtroom.” He swiveled his hot glare to Hec. “Objection denied. Sit down!”

“Now, wait a minute ...” Hec began furiously.

Shelley hammered the bench again and cried in a strangled voice, “One more word out of you, Ramsey, and you will be held in contempt of court. *Sit down!*”

Hec made a gesture of hopelessness and sank back onto his chair, signalling the angry Charles to also subside. The judge, breathing heavily, turned toward Spooner.

“Will the prosecutor please proceed.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” the lawyer said smoothly, and turned back to the jury. “Gentlemen, I beg of you to be generous and try to understand this regrettable outburst of irrational emotion. It is to be expected—and more to be pitied than judged—among those who lead lives of violence.”

He paused, almost as if waiting, hopeful for another outburst from one or the other. When none was forthcoming, he leaned close to the jury.

“Now for my final point, gentlemen. It is a very simple, but very

telling, point—Brock Madden himself. Brock Madden, the only son of *Henry T. Madden*. Dwell upon that as you enter upon your crucial duty, gentlemen.”

“That was it,” Hec said softly. “The one thing we can’t fight.” He held up a hand in front of his face and slowly clenched it into a fist, tightening the fist until the knuckles turned a frosty-white under the weathered bronze. Then, suddenly and explosively, he flicked it open and slapped down on the table. “Because we don’t have the ammunition or the weapons to fight it, damn everything to hell!”

Savannah laid a gentle hand over the clenched fist.

“Don’t, Hec. Please—you’ve done more than I ever anticipated, more than any other man could do or risk under these circumstances. Stop blaming yourself, and accept the fact that it’s hopeless.”

“I will not,” Hec snarled. “I’ll fight them every stinking, dirty step of the way—and I’ll match every dirty trick of his with a dirtier one of mine. They may win, but by God, they’ll know they had the fight of their filthy lives before they rake in any pot.”

As the trial dragged on its prescribed and traditional course, Hec began to get the eerie feeling that time was running wild, gone wildly berserk. Never before in his experience had the dreary routine of murder trials whizzed by at such a breakneck pace. Procedures that normally occupied days were suddenly compacted into speeding quarter-hour segments. Interrogations that would drone on for tedious, wearisome hours, were miraculously completed almost before the court clerk had sharpened a fresh pencil to take his notes.

It took Hec a while to realize that it was not his timesense that had jumped its track. The trial had abruptly disintegrated into pure farce, a mere shadow-show of justice. When Judge Shelley and Prosecutor Spooner openly revealed themselves as puppets, dancing to the twitch of Henry T. Madden’s hand on the strings, there was no longer the need to maintain any front of legality. The only need was to get the rest of the masquerade over with as quickly as possible, so the public could see what happened to anyone who defied the might of Henry T.

Hec shot a sideward glance at Savannah’s pale, set face, and decided not to mention to her what he had discovered about the so-called trial. The poor kid had more than enough doubts in her mind, as it was. Instead, he grimly vowed to do everything he could think of to drag his feet and delay the inevitable conclusion. Given time enough, almost anything could intervene, including a brainstorm of his own.

For the sake of appearances, Spooner had been dredging up a handful of “witnesses”, none of whom had any real bearing on the case. Nevertheless, in the transcript of the trial the interrogations would sound authentic and impressive. Hec suddenly banged a fist

down on the table. That was the very spot into which to stick his barb.

Spooner's current window-dressing was an unkempt and illiterate lout, a hostler for one of the ranches west of town. His only possible connection was the allegation that he had been having a drink in the Yellow Rose on the night of the murder.

"And while you were quietly enjoying your liba—er—drink at the bar, you saw the defendant over there, the woman known as Savannah, come down the stairs and mingle as usual with the crowd in the saloon? Is that substantially correct, Mr. Adwig?"

"No, sir, it ain't. Miz Savannah never did show herself that night a-tall. Firstest time I ever knowed her not to be right on hand the whole evenin'. Reason I knowed she wa'nt there is that me an' the boys at the Double T, we had a bet on that ..."

"Yes, yes," Spooner interrupted sharply. "We won't go into that, Mr. Adwig. Your wager with the boys is not relevant to the subject at hand. You have already testified that the defendant had broken her customary pattern by not appearing in her establishment. That is the only point I wished to have verified. Thank you very much, Mr. Adwig." He turned toward the defendant's table with an airy flick of the hand. "Your witness, counsel—Uh—Mr. Ramsey."

Hec, recognizing the gambit, had been waiving his right to cross examine "witnesses" who were not, in actuality, witnesses to anything relevant. Now, abruptly, he switched tactics and got to his feet.

"Thank you, Counsellor. I do have a few questions to ask the witness." He thought for a moment that both Judge Shelley and Prosecutor Spooner were going to have apoplexy. He struggled to suppress a grin. An expression of confused alarm flashed across the face of the hostler. He threw a frantic, accusing look at Spooner, confirming Hec's guess that these so-called witnesses had been hired for window-dressing, with the assurance that they would not be subjected to any grilling. Hec strode to the chair and put on his fiercest glare, as he confronted the squirming, sweating ranch hand.

"*Mis-ter Adwig*," he barked, levelling a forefinger like a forty-five at his unhappy victim, "I believe you have testified that you were present in the Yellow Rose Saloon, having *a* drink. That was your sworn testimony, under oath. But you also testified—and I quote your exact words—'*Mis Savannah never did show herself that night a-tall*'. Am I to understand, then, Mr. Adwig, that you nursed *one single drink* throughout the major part of one entire night? Does that mean that, perhaps, you have taken the John Barleycorn Oath to abstain from spirituous liquors? Otherwise, I find your sworn statement extremely difficult to swallow."

Spooner was on his feet, his face showing an unmistakable greenish

pallor.

“Objection! Objection!”

“Objection sustained,” Judge Shelley rapped, almost before the words were out of the Prosecutor’s mouth.

“On what basis?” Hec shouted. “According to Blackstone, an objection may only be sustained when based upon an explainable cause. No cause has yet been explained to this court.”

Shelley swallowed hard and threw an appealing look toward Spooner, who was equal to the occasion.

“Badgering the witness. ‘Having a drink’ is a mere figure of speech and is at no time to be taken literally.”

Hec spread his hands, shrugged and said mildly, “Okay, if that’s what you call it. I withdraw the question.”

“Very well,” the Judge said, in a tone of relief. “Then the witness may step down ...”

“*Just a minute!*” Hec bellowed. “Just—one—stinking—little—minute, Your Honor. I am exercising my legal right to cross examine this witness, and I have given no indication whatever that I was finished. In fact, I have a considerable list of questions to be asked, and if I find my rights further interfered with from the bench, I shall feel it quite within my authority to have this declared a mistrial.” He whirled to glare at the court clerk. “I shall expect to find every word of these exchanges accurately reported in the transcript of this spectacle they call a trial. And I’ll need an extra copy of the transcript to give to the Attorney General of the Territory, together with my charges.”

“Charges?” Judge Shelley bleated. “What charges?”

“You will be informed of them in due time—*Your Honor.*”

“Proceed, Mr. Ramsey,” the Judge said weakly.

“Thank you. Now, Mr. Adwig, I hope you haven’t made any urgent plans for the next few hours, because I’m afraid my questions may take up a good part of the day.”

If looks could kill, Hec reflected, the one thrown at the Prosecutor by the hostler could have gotten him indicted for murder in the first degree. To add to the pressure, he stripped off his jacket and draped it on the back of his chair, then unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves before resuming his questioning. The hostler’s nervously-shifting eyes indicated that the pantomime had its effect.

“To get down to business, Mr. Adwig, where were you born?”

“Michigan.”

“And you came to New Mexico directly from Michigan?”

“Yup. Sure I did. When I was seventeen.”

“Thank you. Then you have never been in Ohio?”

“Nope.”

Spooner, red in the face, and wild-eyed, was on his feet, shouting, “*Objection!*”

“Objection denied,” Shelley said.

“But, dammit, Stanley, I can see what he’s ...”

“Sit down and shut up, you damned fool!” Shelley hissed.

“Never been in Ohio at *any* time?” Hec said, in a wondering tone of voice. He subjected the unhappy ranch hand to an unnerving stare through long moments. “That’s ver-ry interesting.”

“Well,” Adwig mumbled, shifting uneasily in his chair. “I come *acrosst* Ohio on the way comin’ down here, if that’s what you mean. I thought you meant did I ...”

“Ah-*haa!*” Hec interrupted in a triumphant voice. “So you *were* in Ohio at the age of seventeen—a most impressionable age, as everyone knows. I’m sure it must be sheer coincidence that our worthy Prosecutor Spooner, for whom you so eagerly testified a few minutes ago, is also from Ohio. And so, I do believe, is our learned Judge Shelley. My, my! Isn’t it interesting how you fellow Buck-eyes do stick together?”

Judge Shelley, his complexion resembling a butcher’s apron on slaughterhouse day, gaveled the desk furiously and bellowed, “The court will recess for thirty minutes.”

When the trial reconvened, Hec was not the least surprised to hear Judge Shelley announce solemnly that during the recess, the witness had disappeared.

“Of course, a bench warrant will be issued, and, upon his apprehension, he will be made available to the defense for the balance of the cross examination. In the meantime, since there are, I understand, no more witnesses to be called, we will have the closing summations and arguments by the prosecution and the defense. Mr. Spooner, are you prepared to proceed?”

“Yes indeed, Your Honor.”

The two had obviously spent the thirty minutes in mending personal fences and regaining control of their badly-shattered nerves. Spooner’s summation was little more than a suave and unemotional rehash of his earlier arguments. It was obvious to Hec that, with the case already tried and sentence passed in advance, there was no longer any need to do more than pay lip service to the format of the law. Listening, he found no reason to change the basic arguments, in rebuttal, that he had already set up in his mind.

When his turn came, he began quietly. "Gentlemen of the jury, I would merely like to refute the Prosecutor's arguments point by point. First, the prosecution's uncalled-for slur on the defendant's profession is a two-edged sword. It would be proper to remember that the late Brock Madden was in identically the same profession—saloon-owner. Hence, any slander on the defendant for that occupation must be considered an equal slander against the son of Henry T. Madden."

The jury members looked shocked. There was a ripple of audible reaction from the spectators.

"Two," Hec continued, ticking off the points of his fingers. "The charge that, through the death of Brock Madden, the defendant became full owner of the Yellow Rose Saloon, is almost too ridiculous to dignify with an answer. Since the deceased died intestate—meaning without having left a will—his entire estate, including the half-interest in the saloon, goes to his next of kin—in this case, his father, Henry T. Madden.

"Three. If the defendant had truly stabbed the deceased *under* the jacket, why would she she stupidly risk calling in any third party to stab through the jacket, when all she would have needed to do was use those same stout shears to snip through the tough leather? If that had been done, the edges of the cut in the jacket would have been smoothly severed. But, as you can all plainly see ..." He extended the jacket for inspection, "the leather fibers here are roughly torn and driven *inward* from the force of an external blow.

"Four. If you know anything at all about women, you'll know that no proud and handsome woman would ever deliberately let her face be damaged—perhaps permanently. If she felt it necessary to prove she had been assaulted, she'd find some other way to do it.

"And, finally—a murder trial is a murder trial, an effort to uncover all the facts having to do with the crime. In this case, the kinship of the victim has nothing whatever to do with the facts of the case, which should never have been brought up as a consideration to begin with. It was a brazen and obvious effort to influence you, as a presumably impartial jury. Like Prosecutor Spooner, I place my trust in the fact that you appear to be much too intelligent and thoughtful to be fooled by such cheap tactics."

He nodded curtly, disdaining an obsequious bow, and returned to his seat. Judge Shelley hammered with his gavel once more.

"This court will recess until the jury is ready to bring in its verdict."

"When do you think that will be?" Savannah whispered anxiously.

"Tomorrow morning," Hec said. "They've already had their orders about the verdict, but they're going to get at least two free meals out of the job."

“You—you mean—it’s hopeless, Hec?”

“Not at all, Rose. I merely mean, that we’ve played their silly game, and now it’s time for a change of tactics. Don’t lose any confidence, now. You’ll need all of it shortly.”



## Chapter Ten

McCabe came over, glared at Hec, slapped a handcuff on Savannah, and then started to haul her back to the jail.

"I'll report to you, honey," Hec said. "Grab that handcuff in the other hand to hold it firm, then keep jerking on it. It'll tear the hell out of his wrist. Then dream about having the other half around his neck, and you'll go to sleep dreaming happily tonight."

McCabe cursed him furiously, but his treatment of Savannah was tender. He led her out and across to the county jail with rare gentleness. Hec watched them, his face woodenly expressionless. Milt Brennan came up beside him.

"You did one helluva job in there, Ramsey, but you were out-voted right from the start. You couldn't have won if you'd had Daniel Webster and Blackstone both in your corner."

"I know that, Milt," Hec said.

"Then all your fine arguments and that exciting business with Mrs. Lambert was a complete waste of time and breath?"

"Not entirely, Milt. First, and most important, I'm sure it convinced a lot of people that Savannah couldn't possibly be guilty, but was being coldbloodedly railroaded to the gallows. There are bound to be a few decent people in Santa Rita who may have second thoughts about letting Henry T. Madden go on getting away with murder. And there's always the chance that I can still come up with evidence strong enough to override even the Madden power."

"Fat chance, Ramsey," Brennan growled. "You've seen how far that foolish hope will carry you around here."

"Ahh, but there's one thing I know that you don't, and if I can get the proof I need, not even Madden will dare go through with this legalized murder."

"What in billy-blue blazes is that?"

"There was someone else in Savannah's room that night. Someone who listened outside her door, heard her being beaten and choked. That someone burst in *after* she'd lost consciousness, grabbed the shears, and stabbed Brock Madden to death."

"Oh, fine," Brennan said grimly. "You saw how far you got trying to convince the powers that be of some such theory. *I'll* listen and believe you, but how many others who matter could you sell on that dream?"

"It's no dream, Brennan. It's cold fact. You know Kate, the girl

whose room is right next to Savannah's?"

"Sure. Everybody knows Kate. What's that got to do with all this?"

"Kate heard the killer and identified his voice. Those walls upstairs are as thin as tissue paper. She heard the killer burst in, heard the actual murder committed, heard him leave—and *return*. Only she's frightened to death that if he finds out what she knows, he'll kill her to close her mouth permanently. When I tried to pin her down on what she heard, she became so panicky that she's run off into hiding somewhere. If I could locate her, not all of Henry T. Madden's power and money could railroad Savannah to the gallows."

"Oh, no," Brennan moaned, clutching his head.

"What do you mean—oh, no? Oh, no, *what*?"

"*Oh, no* to what you're about to ask me, Ramsey, but feeling the way I do about Savannah, I haven't any choice but to do it, anyhow. So go ahead and ask me, dammit."

"You've been around this town long enough to get to know a lot about people. Would you have the slightest idea where Kate would run to for a hideaway?"

"Yes," Brennan said. "I've a pretty good idea. A while back, Kate had some relatives from out of town come to visit. She was pretty upset for fear they'd find out the line of work she was in, so she asked me to pass her off as my assistant at the hotel. I not only done it, but I passed the word around and the whole town kept her secret. Even the preacher had her teaching a Sunday School class, if you can imagine that."

"Would you remember the name of those people?"

"Sure, I would, Ramsey. And if I'd forgot, they stayed at the hotel so their names are in the register. It was an aunt and uncle by the name of Pearson. They've got a farm over near Tucumcari, and my guess is that's exactly where Kate would run to."

"Savannah's last chance is to find Kate and get her to tell what she knows, Brennan. I've got to stay here and see this court business through, but if you could see your way clear to take a trip over there ..."

"I know, I know. You tell Savannah not to worry about it. I'll find Kate and make her talk, if I have to wring the truth out of her. If she isn't at the Pearson farm, I'll keep hunting until I do find her."

"I know you'll do your best, Brennan. You'll find her if she's still above ground. And don't worry about expenses. I'll take care of everything."

"To hell with the expenses. You take care of your job and I'll take care of mine. There's a stage to Tucumcari in about an hour and I'll be

on it.”

“You’re a true friend to Savannah. The very best of luck on your mission.”

“I’ll need it, Ramsey. Will you be doing anything special while you sweat out this waiting period?”

“Yes,” Hec said grimly. “Praying.”

Savannah snapped out of her dark reverie at the metallic grating of a key in the cell door lock. Sheriff McCabe swung the door open as she looked up.

“It’s time to get back to the courthouse, Savannah. The jury just sent word that it’s reached its verdict.”

“They didn’t waste any time, did they? They must have been promised a special bonus to make it quick. Isn’t there something in the law, Bert, about cruel and inhuman punishment? Like making me walk all the way back there just to hear a cut-and-dried verdict everybody in town has known from the very beginning?”

“Go ahead, Savannah. You’ve got every right to be bitter. But this could be something you might not expect. After all, your old friend, Ramsey, put up a mighty strong defense. He surprised me, and I’ll bet he surprised a lot of other people, too. He did a terrific job.”

“Was it good enough to convince Henry T. Madden? Why don’t you go find him and ask him if he’s changed *his* mind? That’d save me that long, hot, dusty walk.”

“Do you know something, Savannah? You’ve changed since that Hec Ramsey blew into town. You don’t act the same, or even think the same.”

“Somebody around here has sure changed,” Savannah said, grimly. “I only wish I knew who it was. Then maybe I wouldn’t be in this godawful mess.”

“I’m really sorry about this whole thing, Savannah. But old friends like us shouldn’t be arguing at a time like this.”

“All right, Bert,” Savannah said tiredly, getting to her feet. “I suppose you’re right, and maybe that walk’ll do me some good after all. Let’s go.”

Hec was waiting at the courtroom door, his expression grim. He took Savannah’s arm, nodded coldly to McCabe, and led her to the defendant’s table. As soon as she was seated, Shelley gavelled the court to order. The jury was already seated in the jury box, and the foreman clutched a folded paper bearing the verdict. The clerk got to his feet and faced the box.

“Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?”

"We have," the foreman intoned.

"The defendant will rise and face the jury. Jury, look upon the defendant. How say you, gentlemen of the jury? Guilty, or not guilty?"

The foreman cleared his throat and muttered, in a strained, unnatural voice, "We find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree."

There were muffled shrieks, groans, gasps from the spectators. Savannah staggered and would have fallen if Hec's arm had not been there to steady her. He led her to her seat at the table, while Judge Shelley pounded his gavel and bawled his, "Order! Order!"

When quiet had been restored, he said, "The jury is dismissed with the thanks of the court. Sentence will be pronounced at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Court is adjourned."

It was late that night when, without a preliminary knock or other warning, the door of Judge Shelley's office swung open. The judge, poring over a stack of papers, looked up sharply. Then he shot to his feet.

"Henry T. Come in, come in, sir. This is a welcome surprise. May I offer you a drink, sir?"

Henry T. Madden, the eternal buffalo robe wrapped around the arthritic legs, hobbled in and collapsed into the visitor's chair. He dismissed the offer of the drink with a flip of his hand. His face was set in a mask of grim decision. The judge, thrown off completely by the surprise visit, was a study in nervous indecision.

"My goodness, sir," he babbled. "This is the first time I've known you to be out at night in many years. Aren't you afraid of getting a chill?"

"Not with the fire I got burning inside me," the old autocrat growled. "There ain't no chill that can quench that."

"Uh—what can I do for you?" Shelley asked nervously.

"Shelley, I've been a good friend to you, haven't I?"

"You certainly have, Henry T., and believe me, I appreciate it. Always have and always will."

"I *made* you, Shelley."

"Well—ah—you certainly helped."

"I made you," the old man repeated flatly.

"Y—yes, sir, Henry T. N—No question about it."

"Shelley, I loved my son, whatever he was. A son is a man's one link with immortality. He may be wild, he may have his flaws, he may be a complete no-good, but there are ways of getting around that. A man

has to protect that son, because that son carries his seed, Shelley. Some day that son should have sons of his own, and they'll carry that seed and eventually pass it along to *their* sons, and that way a man's seed goes on forever—to the end of time, the end of the world. That's what they mean by immortality, Shelley."

"Y—yes, sir, I guess it is," the judge said dubiously.

"I never had but the one son. Do you think I'll ever get another at my age—in my condition? You know damn well that's impossible. When that woman killed my son, she put an end to my line—to the Madden line. That's an awful thing to do to a man, Shelley. An unforgivable thing, putting an end to his line."

He leaned forward, fixing the judge with a fierce and implacable glare. "What are you going to do with her?"

"I haven't made up my mind, yet."

"Well, *I* have—and that means your mind has been made up for you."

Judge Shelley banged his gavel on the bench. His eyes were red-veined, his complexion the color of wet ashes.

"The accused will rise." He waited while Hec helped Savannah to her feet. "Is the accused ready for sentence?"

"Of course I'm not," Savannah snapped.

Shelley gritted his teeth, sucked in a deep breath and announced in an unsteady voice, "It is the sentence of this court that the accused, Rose Ryan, also known as Savannah, will on the tenth day of this month, be handed over to the executioner, to be hanged by the neck until dead. And may God have mercy on your soul."

He gave the gavel a single rap, whirled, and almost ran from the courtroom. The spectators were in an uproar. Hec was on his feet to catch Savannah as she swayed and almost collapsed.

In the late afternoon, Judge Shelley rode out to the Madden ranch to receive a figurative pat on the head for his meek obedience. There might, he thought complacently, even be a bit of cash bonus along with it.

He entered the Madden study to be greeted by Henry T. in a foaming rage. Madden's opening greeting was: "You damn fool, Shelley. You absolute, utter damned fool!"

"But—but, I gave you exactly what you demanded, Henry T. You wanted that woman to be hanged, and she's going to hang isn't she? So what's wrong?"

"What's *wrong*, you stupid idiot? If she ever does hang, it won't be through any intelligent handling by you, you buttbrained dough-

head.”

“But I don’t understand, Henry T. I did exactly what you ordered and handed down the sentence you told me to. I can’t see what you’re upset about.”

“*Upset!*” Madden yelled, his face suffused with the blood of fury. “You goddam stupid idiot! You’re goddam right I’m upset. On the *tenth* of the month, you said. *Eight days from now*, you imbecile! So in that interval, what’s to stop Hec Ramsey from taking the case to the Appeals Court at Santa Fe, dummy?”

“Ramsey is no lawyer, Henry. He’d never even know enough to think of that.”

“He knew enough to make fine horse’s asses out of you and that numbskull Spooner in court. If I hadn’t had the jury bought and paid-for in advance, you two would be out on your stupid prats. You haven’t displayed the brains God gave a goose, and my apologies to the goose. So sit down—and maybe if you sit on your big fumble-footed hands for a minute, you’ll get a lick of sense, though I doubt it. At your age, it’s too late to expect miracles.”

“Now, just a minute, Henry T. ...”

“Oh, shut up!” Madden said, tiredly. “If I paid either of you doughheads what you were worth to me, you’d both have starved to death years ago. I didn’t get my wealth by underestimating my competitors and enemies. If I credit them with more brains than they’ve got, then I’m always two jumps ahead of them.”

“Then—then, what do you want me to do, Henry T.?”

“Do you know something, Shelley? For once I’m not going to tell you what to do. I’m going to let you figure that out all by your lonesome. Maybe the exercise’ll be good for that understaffed skull of yours.” He gave the perspiring Judge time to squirm, then added in a low, savage growl, “But I can tell you one thing. If you *don’t* do it, a certain Judge Shelley is going to be spending his declining years out in the grasslands country—*herding sheep*.”

## Chapter Eleven

Sheriff Bert McCabe sat at his battered desk, his chair teetered back at a perilous angle, his feet propped up. From time to time, he took a long pull at a quart bottle of whiskey that stood on the desk beside his ankles. Most of the town of Santa Rita had long since gone to bed, and almost the only sound to be heard was the rustling of sand grains, stirred by the chill night wind.

The quiet was suddenly broken by the tramp of boots on the plank sidewalk. The door opened, and Hec Ramsey strode in, a small bundle under his arm. McCabe's head snapped up, his face darkening as he recognized the visitor. He swung his feet off the desk and let the front legs of his chair crash down.

"Oh, it's *you*. What the hell do you want this time, Ramsey? Whatever it is, at this hour of the night the answer is 'No'."

"I came to say goodbye to Savannah."

"Well, well. Don't tell me the great Hec Ramsey is slinking back to New Prospect with his tail between his legs, leaving her to face the music alone."

"I'm riding out for Santa Fe tonight, McCabe. There's a thing known as an Appeals Court there, and I want to be waiting at their door when they convene in the morning."

"Go back to the hotel and go to bed, Ramsey. You'll be getting up mighty early tomorrow morning."

"Maybe you don't hear so good," Hec said coldly. "I said I'm leaving tonight for Santa Fe."

"Tch, tch," McCabe said, wagging his head. "It somehow don't seem like you, Ramsey, to go sky-hootin' off like that and miss the hanging."

Hec went rigid, feeling a coldness creep along his nerves. He stared at the sheriff through narrowed, glittering eyes.

"What is that remark supposed to mean, McCabe?"

"I guess maybe you haven't heard the news, Ramsey. Judge Shelley moved up the date of the execution. It's set for six o'clock tomorrow morning. It seems he decided dragging out her final hours for eight days was cruel and inhuman treatment, so he decided getting it over with quick was kinder." He got to his feet. "Right now you'll have to excuse me, Ramsey. I've got to go out back and see what's holding up them workmen who are setting up the gallows. We can't have the

hanging without the gallows, naturally.”

“Wait a minute, McCabe. I came here to see Savannah.”

“Oh, did you, now? What are you—a close relative of some kind? Brother, maybe? Uncle? Cousin? *Husband*? You all of a sudden got to be such a smart lawyer, how come you don’t know what the law says about only members of the immediate family can visit the condemned on the night before an execution.” He jerked a thumb toward the door into the cell block. “I’ve got a deputy back there with a shotgun to make sure that law ain’t busted by *anybody*. So don’t let me keep you, Ramsey.”

“And I thought you were one of Savannah’s real friends.”

“You see that bottle there?” McCabe snarled, nodding toward the whiskey. “That’s the only thing that’ll see me through tomorrow morning.” He snatched up the bottle and took a long pull.

When he set it back on the desk, Hec was leaning across, the muzzle of his cocked hand gun almost touching the tip of McCabe’s nose.

“Savannah and I have a date, sheriff, and if I were you and wanted to stay healthy, I wouldn’t try to make me break it.”

“I’ll be damned,” McCabe said in a sour voice. “I really didn’t figure you’d go this far with it, Ramsey. But there you stand, badge and all. I guess they’d call you a rogue lawman.”

“Never mind that,” Hec said through set teeth. “Slide your gun out easy and careful and lay it here on the desk. Then get your keys.”

“I suppose I should have expected this,” the sheriff said as he complied, laying the gun down in slow motion, then unhooking the ring of heavy keys from a nail in the wall. “I guess there was a time in my life when I’d probably have done the same thing, and to hell with the consequences. Just what do you expect this’ll gain you, Ramsey? Two hours? Three hours, maybe? You know we’ll be hot on your trail before sunup. Is being with her that little bit of time going to be worth the ten years you are going to get for aiding and abetting a jail break?”

“Oh, why don’t you just shut up?” Hec snarled.

“Because I’ve got a sort of confession to make, Ramsey. I lied to you just now. The truth is, I’ve been expecting something like this all evening.” He raised his voice. “All right, Harry and Beevo. You boys come out now and give Mr. Ramsey the kind of warm welcome that’ll make him decide to stay here with us instead of rushing off and making everybody a lot of unnecessary trouble.”

The door of the wardrobe swung open and a burly deputy stepped out, grinning and leveling a cocked shotgun at Hec’s midsection. A second deputy, with a matching shotgun, stood up from behind the



big safe in the corner. Hec looked from one to the other, weighing the odds and finding them loaded against him. He sighed and laid his gun on the desk.

Grinning, McCabe snatched it and dropped it into a desk drawer, then retrieved his own pistol and ring of keys.

“You had me worried there for a while, Ramsey. After all the trouble we went to getting ready, I was beginning to get scared you wouldn’t show up at all, let alone try to pull something crazy like this. Just to show you how much we appreciate your not letting us down, after all, I’m going to do you a favor. You were willing to risk everything for maybe an hour or two with Savannah, so I’m going to put you in the same cell with her and let you two be together all night. Lead on.”

A third deputy was dozing in a chair in the corridor outside Savannah’s cell, his shotgun across his lap. He started up at the sound of their steps, then sank back as McCabe called,

“Don’t shoot, Hank. Everything’s under control.”

Drawn by the echoing steps and the voice, Savannah was at the door of her cell, peering out. At the sight of Hec, her eyes went wide and her mouth flew open.

“Got company for you, Savannah. Your attorney’s here to hold your hand. I think may be wants to apologize for losing your case.”

“Hec,” Savannah gasped. “Why—why are they pointing guns at you?”

“Because,” Hec said bitterly, “I had what looked at the time like a great idea—only it didn’t turn out quite the way I figured it.”

McCabe let Hec into the cell, then slammed and locked the barred door behind him.

“Harry, you and Beevo might as well go home now and get your sleep. The action’s over for the night—as far as you’re concerned, anyhow. Hank, you come on out front and we’ll play us a little whist. These people are entitled to a little privacy, seeing’s the night’ll be over all too soon.”

The moment they were alone, Savannah rushed in Hec’s arms, sobbing, “Oh, Hec, Hec, you shouldn’t have tried whatever you tried. You only made more trouble for yourself. You can’t help me now. No one can.”

“I had to try, Rose. There just wasn’t any way around it. It might have worked out if I hadn’t underestimated McCabe.” He slumped down heavily on the bunk. “We’ll just have to figure out some other way ...” He stopped short. “That clattering, jingling noise. Is something loose on your bunk, Rose?”

“That’s the spring you’re hearing, Hec. It wakes me up a dozen times a night, whenever I make the slightest little movement.”

Hec sprang up and turned back the thin mattress, exposing the springs. This consisted of a strong lattice work of steel wires, suspended within a metal frame by a great many three-inch steel coil springs. Hec whistled softly and threw the mattress aside. Kneeling by the cot he began unhooking the coils from the frame and latticework.

“I don’t understand, Hec,” Savannah said, frowning. “You act as if you’d discovered ...”

“Shh!” Hec gestured for silence, then motioned for her to help disconnect the coils, which he began linking together until he had what amounted to a flexible chain some three feet in length.

The ends of the spring frame yielded two flat strips of metal. He bent these around two adjoining bars of the cell, some four feet up from the floor, then hooked the ends of his string of coils to the two flat pieces. This gave him what amounted to a powerful sling shot. Savannah’s mouth flew open as she suddenly realized what his handiwork had produced.

Hec motioned for her to turn the oil lamp low, throwing much of the cell into deep shadow, and effectively concealed the damage done to the bunk. Slipping off one boot, he hooked the heel over the center of his improved slingshot and hauled back as far as the coil springs would stretch.

“McCabe,” he called. “Hey, McCabe. Can I see you for a minute? There’s something important I guess you ought to know.”

After a long, tense moment, the corridor door opened. McCabe came through, closing it behind him, and started toward Savannah’s cell, scowling.

“All right, Ramsey. Now what’s on your mind? If you’ve got an idea of making some kind of a deal, you can for ...”

Hec took careful aim and let go. The hard heel of the flying boot caught the sheriff on the head. He went down like a poleaxed steer, dropping the keys and falling upon them. Hec dropped to the floor, stretching as far as he could through the bars, but the keys were tantalizingly just out of his reach and partially pinned under McCabe’s unconscious body.

Swearing softly, Hec snatched up the latticework of wires from the bunk and pushed it out between the bars. The additional reach enabled him to hook the butt of McCabe’s pistol and drag it close enough to be snatched through the bars. Cocking it, Hec got to his feet and raised his voice.

“Hank, I think you’d better come back here. It looks to me like your

sheriff has tripped and hurt himself.”

Hank came bursting into the corridor, grunted sharply and knelt to examine the motionless figure.

“While you’re down there, Hank,” the prisoner said, in a mild, conversational voice, “would you be kind enough to work those keys out from under McCabe’s hip and hand them up to me?”

Hank jerked his head up and around and found himself staring unhappily into the muzzle of the sheriff’s pistol, held in Hec’s hand between the bars. He hesitated, swallowed noisily, dragged the keys out from under McCabe, and meekly handed them up to Hec.

“Thank you, Hank. I’ll mention you in my will.”

He reached through to unlock the cell door from the outside. Hank watched him with wary, frightened eyes.

“You’ve been very cooperative, Hank. Now I’d appreciate it if you’d drag him in here, so this can all be handled in a nice, friendly way.”

Hank got the limp figure of Sheriff McCabe under the arms and dragged him inside the cell. Hec turned to Savannah.

“I remember when you used to know how to handle a gun.”

“I still do.”

Hec handed her the gun he had snaked away from McCabe. “Keep them covered, then, while I go through the old tie-and-gag routine, Rose.” He pulled a sheet from the roll of bedding, ripped it into strips, and used it to tie and gag both the frightened Hank and McCabe, who was beginning to stir with returning consciousness.

“Don’t look so scared, Hank,” Hec said soothingly. “You’re as safe as in your mother’s arms. After all, I’m a deputy myself, you know, and nothing would annoy me more than getting myself shot and killed. So I try to practice that do-unto-others idea whenever it seems practical.”

He locked the pair in Savannah’s cell, threw the keys out the window into the darkness, then got his own gun out of the sheriff’s desk drawer. He tucked it back into his own holster and left the sheriff’s weapon with Savannah. Hand in hand, they slipped out into the night.

Oil lanterns were flaring and flickering, around the platform where the gallows were under construction. A short distance beyond, two horses were tethered to a rail fence.

“Ours,” Hec said, pointing them out. “A hell of a place to leave them, I well know, but I wanted them off the street and pretty much out of sight—but close by, in case we had to burst out of here, dodging bullets.”

Hec stopped abruptly and cursed under his breath. A heavy freight wagon, loaded with two-by-four scantlings and short sections of

planking, rumbled in past the jail and came to a halt between the unfinished gallows and the fence where the two horses were tied. Two men clambered down, spent some minutes in an argument with the driver, and then began to unload the lumber which was obviously intended for the completion of the gallows and its drop-platform. From their manner of operation, it was equally obvious that if ambition were, indeed, a grievous fault, those two would never suffer any serious consequences.

Hec spread his hands and growled, "There goes our chance at the horses. At the rate those sons of lightning are moving, they won't be out of there much before dawn. And we'd be spotted in a moment if we tried to get to them before they leave."

"Can't we hide somewhere close by and wait, Hec?"

"No chance, Rose. By about now, McCabe will be waking up, sore as a boil on an Indian warrior's tail. All he'll have to do is bust out the window and bellow at these characters and they'll have him and his deputy free in no time flat. Our only chance is to put all possible distance between them and us before daylight, when they can see to follow our tracks."

"You—you make everything sound so hopeless, Hec."

"Any more hopeless than inside, behind those bars, Rose?"

She remained silent, but her hand tightening on his arm was an adequate answer.

From the street came the sudden clumping of a horse's hooves, the rattle of light buggy wheels and the highly unmusical disharmony of a male voice raised in drunken song. Hec's arm pressed Savannah back against the wall as the buggy passed the jail and sheriff's office, its lone occupant swaying happily on the seat.

"That may be our salvation, Rose. If he's headed where I think he's headed, be ready to run and jump."

True to Hec's shrewd guess, the driver swung the buggy in to the rail in front of the Yellow Rose. The fact that the saloon had long since closed was either unapparent to the driver, or was no deterrent. Half-climbing, half-falling out of the buggy, he wobbled to the door of the darkened liquortorium and broke off his song to shout.

"Turn up the lamp, Charlie! Turn up the lamp, goddammit, an' shend out the brash band. Pete'sh here an' thirshty."

He tried the locked door, shook it, fell against it, hammered it with his fists, and lifted his voice in profane and hiccupped demands for entrance.

"This is our chance," Hec said. "Pick up those skirts and run for it."

Hauling Savannah by the wrist, he burst into the street and ran for

the abandoned buggy. Its owner, still preoccupied with getting entrance to the Yellow Rose, continued to pound the door and bellow. The noise covered the sound of the two clambering into the buggy and Hec's slapping the reins to get them started. The old horse lumbered into a gallop as the buggy's owner discovered what was going on and reacted.

"Hey, hey, hey! Come back wizh my horshe an' buggy, goddammit. Get back here thish minute, you sonsabishes!"

"Sometimes," Hec said grimly, snatching the buggy whip from its socket, "I wish I weren't such a soft-hearted galoot. Leaving him alive may be our worst mistake. If I'd split his skull and lugged him along with us, he wouldn't have been able to run to the sheriff's office and tell McCabe how a man and a woman ran off with his rig."

Savannah squeezed his arm and murmured, "If you weren't that kind of soft-hearted galoot, as you call it, Hec, I'm sure I wouldn't have gone on feeling the way I always have about you."

"Just the same," Hec growled, "I can almost hear McCabe telling his posse, 'We oughta be back by noon or before, boys. They can't make any time in that buggy with an old plug in the shafts. And nothin's easier to track than a horse and buggy.'"

Sheriff Bert McCabe stormed out of his office, slammed a carbine into the saddle boot, and climbed onto his horse. To his deputies, Harry and Beevo, he snarled:

"We oughta be back by noon or before, boys. It's a dead cinch they ain't gonna get very far or make any time with Pete's old plug in the shafts. And there ain't nothin' easier to track than a horse and buggy."

To the half-dozen waiting possemen on their horses, he barked, "Let's get going. And keep your eyes peeled for the track so we don't hafta waste a lot of time rangin'."

He waved his arm like an old cavalry captain and the little force trotted obediently after him, in the first pale light of dawn. At the edge of town, McCabe flung up his arm again to bring the posse to a halt. A lone rider came toward them, emerging from the dawn shadows.

McCabe squinted at the approaching figure and his eyes bulged as he gasped, "Henry T. Madden! Guh—good morning, Mr. Madden, sir. Wh-what brings you out at this unearthly hour?"

"Disgust!" Madden snapped furiously. He was wearing an unaccustomed six-gun and carrying a rifle in the saddle boot. "If you want something done properly, do it yourself."

"I—I don't understand, sir."

“I’m riding with you, McCabe. I’m damned sick and tired of leaving the administration of justice to a pack of incompetent nincompoops who have bungled everything I ever paid them for.”

“B-but it’ll be a hard ride, sir. H-how about your ...?”

“My arthritis? I brought it with me, along with my guns and my sense. If you expect to see any signs of weakness because of it, you can forget it—the way you seem to forget a few other things, such as who got you elected to your job in the first place.”

“Y-yes, *sir*, Mr. Madden, sir,” McCabe said, sweating.

## Chapter Twelve

The old horse had started off briskly enough, but by the time the morning sun was high enough to strike with authority, both his legs and his wind were playing out. He was heaving and wobbling in the shafts by the time they came to a waterhole.

When Hec pulled to a stop, Savannah peered anxiously behind and asked, "Can we risk stopping here, Hec? After all, we haven't come very far."

"We can either risk it," Hec said grimly, "or abandon a dead horse and practice long distance walking. With your high-heeled shoes and my high-heeled boots, that doesn't leave us any very desirable choice, Rose. Go around on the far side of the pond to drink and wash. I'll join you when I've given the nag all the water I think it's safe to let him have."

Rather than risk unhitching the exhausted horse, he led it, still in the shafts, down to the water's edge and slipped the bridle and bit, leaving the bridle under its chin for a halter. He let the thirsty mount drink briefly, then pulled up its head for a period of absorption before letting it down for more. An experienced horseman, he knew that any mount, hot and exhausted, could quickly founder itself if left to slake its thirst completely in one uninterrupted drinking session.

While he waited for the horse to finish, he looked around sharply. The waterhole had irrigated the arid ground around it far enough to support the growth of a fringe of small trees. An exceptionally bushy tree caught and held his eye. He nodded at an unvoiced conclusion.

When he felt the old horse had drunk its safe fill, he led the animal over to one of the sparse patches of grass, watered by the spring that fed the sink, and left it to graze, with the bit out and hanging. Then he went around to the opposite rim of the pool, where Savannah had finished a spit-bath ablution, and was struggling to force her hair into a semblance of its former majestic mass.

Throwing himself down, he drank thirstily. When he got to his feet again, Savannah said, "Isn't this the most beautiful morning, Hec?"

"I like it," Hec said grimly, scrubbing a shirtsleeve across his mouth. "For reasons all my own."

Savannah threw herself into his arms, hugging him fiercely.

"I *love* it. Just think, Hec—if it weren't for you, I'd have been dead almost four hours by now. Oh, Hec, I never realized before what being alive means. It's—it's like being born all over again to a whole new

life in a whole new world.”

“I try not to think about that, Rose, and I’d suggest it would be a good idea if you’d do the same. At almost any time now, McCabe and his posse are going to catch up with us and all those lovely, happy delusions are liable to vanish in a storm of bullets. So follow my lead, enjoy them to the fullest while you can, and forget both the past and the future. For us, right now, there isn’t very much of either left.”

After the grimness of the speech, he was silent for a moment. Then suddenly, let loose a chortle of subdued laughter. Savannah drew back, staring at him, roundeyed, as if she thought he had lost his mind.

“Hec, are you cracking up? I know you’ve been under a fearful strain, but ... but ...”

Hec patted her hand and chuckled again.

“I know it sounds crazy, Rose, but at times like this a man sometimes find a little stray beam of comedy to make things easier to bear. I got this sudden thought—of how you and I spoiled Henry T. Madden’s gourmet breakfast this morning.”

Savannah giggled, then burst into genuine laughter, rocking back and forth as much from reaction to their danger as to the humor itself. She sobered abruptly.

“That makes two things I can think of with delight and be forever grateful for—whatever ‘forever’ means to us now.” Her laughter turned into a strangled sob and she suddenly got hold of Hec’s arm and buried her tear-streaked face against his shoulder. “Oh, Hec, Hec, what *is* going to become of us? What is the answer? We can’t go on running like this forever. If we elude them this time, there’ll always be the next time—and the next—when we won’t.”

“We won’t have to, honey,” Hec said soberly, tightening the circle of his arm around her trembling shoulders. “I know the whole answer to your trouble is in Kate’s hands. I’ll never doubt that she holds the answer to everything for you right in her frightened little head. Milt Brennan has gone to find her—with a better than good idea of where she’s hiding out now. The moment he does find her, and persuade her to tell what she’s hiding, not even Henry T. Madden’s money and hatred can railroad you to prison or the gallows, ever again. It’s that simple, honey.”

“But—but here we are on the run, hiding, fearing. Even if he *does* find Kate and *does* get her testimony, how can he use it unless he can reach us and get that information into your hands, Hec?”

“Honey,” Hec said solemnly, “you just don’t give old man Ramsey credit for any common sense at all, do you? Just before I busted one Savannah, alias Rose Ryan, out of the local *juzgado*—otherwise known



as *jug*, *hoosegow*, *jail*, *pen*, *box*, *poky*, *coop*, *cooler* or other affectionate terms—I had a talk with Milt, as he was taking the stage. We arranged to meet at a spot we both know well, up around Ladrone's Peak, the moment he can get back with Kate's testimony. Since he knows relatives of hers over at Tucumcari, I'd say there's every chance he'll find her hiding out there. And once Milt puts on his best tone of persuasion, my money is on a quick return with everything we need to know for you."

"Oh, Hec, Hec," she murmured, clutching him tightly. "I don't know how a woman could get to deserve a loyal man like you ..."

The rest of the sentence was lost as Hec's iron-hard arm thrust out, knocking her onto her back, then pinning her down. His right hand had the heavy forty-five out and cocked and centered on the screening brush where his sharp ears had caught a threshing noise approaching in a maimer that sounded far more human than animal.

A few moments later a young boy in his mid-teens pushed through the brush, swinging an empty canteen by its strap. He discovered the grazing horse and the buggy across the waterhole first. Then he turned his head toward Hec and Savannah. His eyes bugged, and his face turned so pale that his freckles stood out like spots of paint over his nose and cheeks. He dropped the canteen and threw up both trembling hands.

"Don't shoot, mister. Gee whiz, p-please don't shoot. I only come down for a dab of water for my canteen, but I won't even take that if'n it don't set right with you."

Hec grinned his most engaging grin and dropped the handgun back into its holster.

"Relax, son. You startled the blazes out of us and we startled them out of you, so I guess that puts us about even. Help yourself to all the water you need. We just didn't expect company out here in the middle of nowhere."

"My—my pa's took up land over on the edge of the sandcountry and I was out herdin' a-a few cattle an'—you won't shoot me if I say it, will you, mister?—sheep."

Hec's laughter was rich and genuine. "Son, leg of lamb is one of my favorites. I've been tromped by steers and butted by rams, and believe me, tromping is worse. Go ahead and fill up your canteen. Then maybe I can tell you how to earn a piece of money as easy as falling off a log."

"Oh, gee whiz, yes." He scrambled to the edge of the waterhole and filled his canteen, throwing quick, wary glances over his shoulder. He got back to his feet. "Did you say *money*?"

"Five dollars," Hec said, taking out a packet of bills and peeling off

the top. Then, on impulse, he added, "And a genuine Bowie knife in its own sheath, in exchange for that canteen."

"Y-you want I should *k-kill* somebody, mister?"

"Nothing of the kind, son. As you can see, our old horse is just about played out, so all we want you to do is drive it into Raton and leave it at the hitchrail in front of the sheriff's office. That's all you need to do to earn the money and the knife. And I'll pay you right now, in advance, so you'll know it's no swindle."

"Oh, gee whiz," the boy repeated again. He pointed at Savannah. "But what are you and her goin' to do, mister, without the horse and buggy? There ain't no place in walkin' distance."

"Don't you worry about us," Hec said glibly. "A friend of ours is due to meet us here shortly, bringing our own riding horses. You'll merely save him having to go back leading the horse and buggy to deliver it properly."

"What if the sher'ff or somebody asks me what I'm doin' with a horse and buggy that ain't mine, what'll I say to 'em Mister?"

"Just what I said to you, son—the truth. Always try to tell the exact truth throughout your life, and you'll save yourself a barrel of troubles and miseries."

"I be everlastin' danged," the boy said, shaking his head in wonder. "I never seed a feller like'n to you, ever in my borned days. But you know somethin', mister? I got a funny kinda feelin' I kin trust you all the dern old way."

"*You* know somethin', young man?" Savannah spoke up for the first time. "So do I."

"Aw," Hec said, twisting his fingers together, "Get along with you before you two get together and plain gee-whiz spoil me outa my natural modesty."

The plodding horse and clattering buggy rounded a sharp bend and emerged from the pass, to find the way blocked by the eight grim-faced men on horseback. They were lined up, stirrup-to-stirrup, across the narrow, rutted road, every one of them pointing a rifle or handgun. The boy dropped the reins, gulped, and thrust his arms as high as they would reach into the air.

"Gee almighty whiz," he blurted. "This sure is my day for gettin' guns pointed at me. If'n you gents are aimin' to rob me, you go right ahead, but I can tell you right now, you'll find mighty slim pickin's."

Then a shaft of morning sun, slanting down over the low ridge, picked out the glint of shiny metal on the big rider's shirt. The boy recognized a lawman's badge, then, and some of his confidence

returned. Cautiously he lowered his arms.

The man with the badge gave a low-voiced command and the line spurred forward, closing in on the buggy. The boy figured the big lawman as the leader until he got a closer look at the set face of the old man, riding next to him. It was plain to him then who the *real* boss of this bunch was, badge or no badge. That face was made to give orders, but it's owner wouldn't *take* one from the Almighty hisself.

The old man spurred up beside the buggy and turned a cold glare on the nervous boy.

"Where'd you get this horse and buggy, young fella?"

"It ain't mine, mister. A man back there a ways give me five dollars cash money and this here knife to drive it into Raton and leave it at the sheriff's hitchrail. Trouble is, I don't think this poor old nag'll make it that far. That feller plumb ruint this here horse. Plumb ruint him."

"Yes, yes, I can see that," Henry T. Madden snapped impatiently. "This man who hired you—was he all alone or was there a woman with him?"

"There sure was a woman, mister, and a right purty one, I can tell yuh."

Sheriff McCabe spurred closer to the buggy and barked, "Well, come on, come on, boy. Where did you meet them? Where are they now?"

"Back up the road a piece," the boy said, turning to point back at the pass. "At the waterhole they call the Big Sink. Beyond the other side of the pass, the road forks. You take the right-hand fork and you can't miss it."

"I know the place," McCabe said. "I've been this way a time or two in the past."

"Were they on foot, boy?" Madden demanded.

"Yes, sir, but the man said a friend was goin' to join them there with their saddle horses. I sure hope he don't treat his saddle horse like he treated this yere ..." But he was talking to a receding dust cloud as the eight drove in their spurs and thundered off into the pass.

As he rode up, Milt Brennan was still not sure the woman wielding the hoe in the corn patch was Kate. The poke bonnet hid her face as thoroughly as the loose-fitting gingham dress disguised her figure. She was bent over the hoe handle, with her back to him, and was not yet aware of his presence.

Her first knowledge was the creak of saddle leather as Brennan swung down and ground-haltered his horse in the shade of a tree. She straightened up and turned. The hoe slipped out of her grasp and her

hands flew to her cheeks.

"Hello, Kate," he said quietly.

She came along the row with dragging steps. Her eyes were wide and frightened and, beneath a mask of dust, her face was ashen.

"Brennan! Why? Oh, why did you have to track me here? Who else knows where I am?"

"No one, Kate, to the best of my knowledge. I remembered your aunt and uncle, so this seemed the logical place for you to hide. I didn't mention it to anyone else—except Hec Ramsey. He's the one asked me to find you."

"*Him!*" she gasped. "Oh, *no*."

"Kate, why did you run away and leave Savannah to die, when a word from you could save her life?"

"And cost me mine. Brennan, I'm thirty-two years old, and half of those years I've spent breathing stale cigar smoke and kissing men that smelled as sour as spoiled vinegar, drinking rotgut whiskey and smiling until my jaws ached. I can't remember more'n twice in my life I ever got pawed by somebody with clean fingernails. I got fed up to here with sawdust in my slippers and showin' my underwear when my best had holes in it. Out here the air is clean and when a man snaps his fingers, you can figure he's calling his dog." She paused, twisting her hands into the front of her dress. "Brennan, would you believe that I used to sing in the choir?"

"Yes, Kate, I'd believe that."

Her mouth twisted bitterly. "Until one of the fine, upright church Elders raped me."

"That's rough, Kate. I can understand how a thing like that could ruin your life."

"You damn bet it did," she spat savagely.

"Now that I've listened to the sad story of your ruined life, how about letting me listen to one more thing—the answer to my question? Why *did* you kite out on Savannah when she needed you so desperately. Did you secretly hate her that much?"

"Oh, *no*," she cried in a shocked voice. "How could I ever hate Savannah? She was the best friend I ever had. It was that man, that Hec Ramsey. Believe me, if there's one thing I know, it's men, and when one like him asks a question, he expects to get an answer. He'll hound you and claw at you until he gets it, no matter how hard you try not to tell something."

"Then why didn't you just give him his answer?"

"Because that answer would guarantee that I'd never get out of Santa Rita alive."

“But now you’re out and you’re alive. This is Tucumcari, and Santa Rita is a long way away. So it will be perfectly safe to tell me what you know. Hec and I can carry on from there. I promise you’ll never have to appear in court or even return to Santa Rita.”

Kate chewed her lip and twisted her hands. Her eyes were clouded by indecision, torn between fear for her own safety and torment over the fate of Savannah.

“Don’t let me pressure you into a snap decision. Take plenty of time to think it through, Kate. I can let you have five minutes.”

## Chapter Thirteen

This time, it was Sheriff McCabe who held up a hand to halt the posse, then motioned them to move in close.

“The Big Sink waterhole,” he said in a low voice, “is just ahead, behind that screen of trees and brush. We’d do best, I’d say, to split up, four and four, and close in from both sides. Do you agree, Mr. Madden?”

“McCabe,” Henry T. said, “there are moments when you positively amaze me by acting as if there was a fragment of working brain in that skull of yours. Let’s go—and keep a sharp eye out for tracks leading away from there. Somehow, I can’t quite see that Ramsey just sitting around, waiting for us to catch up with them.”

They made a cautious approach, then burst in simultaneously through the thin screen of small trees and brush, with McCabe leading one contingent and Madden the other. As the old man had anticipated, their quarry had flown. The tracks of the horse and buggy plainly showed where the animal had been led down to water. From there, the marks of Savannah’s shoes and Hec’s boots led around to the opposite side, where they were joined by the tracks of the boy’s heavy brogans.

It was child’s play to read the sign of the buggy’s departure, then the tracks of Hec and Savannah setting out away from the waterhole. Suddenly, a dozen or so yards away from the sink, the two sets of tracks simply vanished as if the fugitives had sprouted wings and flown away.

Driven by the stinging lash of Madden’s tongue, McCabe and his possemen fanned out, ranging back and forth in an effort to pick up the tracks once more. From the point where the tracks disappeared, the trail might have led in any direction. None of the men were exactly amateurs at tracking, but more than an hour of intensive searching left them as baffled as ever.

Henry T. Madden was in a state of rage and frustration. He was also a very sick man. His complexion was a greenish gray, and the beads of perspiration that dotted his forehead were not a product of sun’s heat. From time to time he hugged his middle and doubled over, until he seemed in imminent danger of toppling out of his saddle. The others watched him from the corner of their eyes, but not even McCabe had the temerity to suggest making camp until Madden’s attack eased off.

It was one of the possemen, Jake Krohl, who solved the mystery of

the vanishing tracks. He was coming through the screen of trees when he stopped short, looking upward.

"Here's the answer," he called, pointing. "You can see here how Ramsey managed his trick, but knowing it don't make picking up their trail again any easier."

The others crowded around, looking up, then nodding understandingly. Old Madden, with no experience in tracking, missed the point.

"Dammit, will you idiots stop that stupid nodding and explain it to me? All I see is the stub of a broken branch up there. What about it?"

"Ramsey's fallen back on an old Injun trick," Jake explained. "Him and her are draggin' the broken branch behind them to brush out their tracks in the loose sand. Injun war parties and horse-stealers allus used to drag branches behind their ponies to rub out their tracks."

"Well? Well? What can we do about it? Come up with an idea of some kind, and make it fast," Madden snarled.

"There only one thing we can do, Mr. Madden," McCabe took over. "Dragging a heavy branch'll slow 'em down some and, in this heat, wear her, at least, to a frazzle. What we've got to do is range back and forth until we find where they dropped the branch and start leaving tracks again. Maybe, sir, you ought to stay here in the shade and rest until we pick up their trail."

"There's nothing wrong with my eyesight," Madden snapped. "I can recognize a tree branch and two sets of footprints as well as any of you. So stop jawing and get on with it."

In spite of there being eight pairs of eyes prosecuting the search, it was late afternoon before one of the possemen stumbled upon the discarded tree branch, almost denuded except for the shreds of a few remaining leaves. Immediately beyond, the paired footprints began again, heading on across the barren desert.

This time, when McCabe found the courage to again suggest a camp-stop, Henry T. Madden was too sick and exhausted to argue. He even gave McCabe faint praise for having the general direction of the trail marked by a row of crude stakes, in case the night's wind erased the tracks before sunrise. As far as they could see, even through Madden's expensive binoculars, the twin-tracks ran on, almost arrow-straight, toward the woods and the streams and thickets of the distant foothills. In the morning, they had only to sight along the markers and follow that course to pick up the tracks again.

The posse, worn out from the day's grueling pursuit, ate and rolled into their blankets almost before the last belch and nature-relief visit to the outer shadows. Henry T. sat close to the fading fire, double blankets around the arthritic legs and a cup of steaming hot tea, laced

generously with brandy, in his cold hands. He sipped and wanned his hands on the mug and fanned his savage hate with memories. Now and again, he clutched at his middle and doubled over, clenching his jaws against the groans of agony that sought to break through his reserve.

There was a noisy scrabbling of boots and Sheriff Bert McCabe came hesitantly out of the darkness.

“You—you feeling all right, Mr. Madden?”

“Of course I am, you nitwit. Aside from being in constant agony, I’m in the pink of health,” Madden snarled. Then, softening slightly, he added, “Aside from being in constant agony—yes. Over the years I’ve even grown fairly accustomed to joints that creak like a rusty suit of armor and hurt like all the demons from hell were jabbing them with red-hot pitchforks. But this new one here ...” He indicated the width of his chest. “... makes all the other aches and pains seem like mere tickles.”

“Anything I could do to help?”

“Just sit there, McCabe, and keep me company for a little while. You know, pain is the loneliest companion in the world. It won’t talk to you or let you forget it for one minute, but it’s always right there. You can go to another room, another town, even another country, but you can’t ever give it the slip. It’s right with you every moment of every day. It’s got you locked up in chains that can’t be broken. You could offer all the gold in the world, but it wouldn’t be enough ransom to buy your freedom from it.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Madden. I know it must be pretty fierce.”

“I get pretty rough on you sometimes, McCabe, but the truth is I probably trust you further than I ever would a lot of the others I’ve bought. Do you have any idea why? It’s because you’re so close to the bottom of the heap that, if you ever got out of line, I could step on you the way I’d step on an ant or a spider and never give it another thought.”

He broke off, rocking forward, clutching his chest and gasping hoarsely. After a few moments the pain seemed to ease, and he could pick up the thread of his rambling monologue.

“You know my son was a no-good wastrel, a thief, a whoremonger, an all-around pain in the butt to everybody who ever came into contact with him. But he had one redeeming feature that meant a lot to me these last tormented years. He would *talk* to me—even if it was only yelling at me and cursing me. Oh, some of the fights we had you couldn’t believe, McCabe. But anything was better than just sitting there, day in and day out, listening to my own body being torn apart on the rack of pain. It was a pain, too, those fights, but it was a



different kind of pain—one you turn your back on and learn to live with, even forget once in a while. You could get boiling mad and swear at it, and even that helped a little.”

“I understand, Mr. Madden,” McCabe said.

“The hell you do,” Henry T. suddenly rasped. “You don’t understand one damn thing.” He clutched his chest and bent almost double with another wave of agonizing pain. He managed to gasp, “Laudanum—vest pocket.”

McCabe scrambled over to find and fish out the small phial. He pulled the cork and shook a few scant drops into the old man’s straining mouth. With almost miraculous suddenness the powerful drug began to take effect. Henry T. managed to sit up straight again, and his breathing became more normal. He got a handkerchief out and patted away the cold beads of perspiration that dotted his forehead. He was shaking with a chill, and McCabe hurriedly piled more wood onto the fire.

“You know what I think, Mr. Madden? I think maybe what you ought to do is ...”

“I know what you think,” Madden said grimly. “You think I ought to turn back and go home, leaving *you* to run this posse in your own sweet way. Well, you can just think again, McCabe. You had your big chance, and you muffed it by letting her slip through your fingers. I wouldn’t be here suffering and the rest of you wouldn’t be here, wearing yourselves out, if you had done your job properly. On my payroll, one chance is all you get. I’m going to be right with the rest of you to the finish, making damn sure she never gets away again.”

He got the granite pot from its bed of coals and replenished the hot tea, adding another hefty slug of brandy. He made no effort to offer any of it to McCabe, whose eyes were on the bottle.

He sipped the steaming liquid, then barked, “Go on to bed, McCabe. We’ve got a hard and busy day ahead of us tomorrow.” As the sheriff climbed to his feet, Madden added in a venomously-soft voice, “And McCabe—if you ever repeat one word of this night’s conversation to *anybody*, I promise you I’ll have you hogtied and saddle-drug clear to Portland.”

## Chapter Fourteen

A scant few miles south and west of the posse's camp, the fugitives sat by their tiny fire, finishing a late supper. Hec had located their camp site mainly by instinct, a shallow depression at the edge of the foothills, surrounded by a jumble of fallen rock that would hide the light of a small fire from the eyes of pursuers. They had made better time than Hec had hoped, but he harbored no delusions that they had bought themselves any great margin of safety.

He watched Savannah nibble the last morsel of meat from a slender bone and reluctantly toss the bone away.

"My goodness, Hec, I never knew rabbit could taste so delicious, even without salt."

"Have you ever eaten rattlesnake meat, Rose?"

"Ugh! Good heavens, no. The very thought revolts me."

"Don't dwell on it," Hec said grimly. "Where we're headed, there are a lot more rattlesnakes than there are jack rabbits. Before this little stroll is over, you're liable to consider snake meat every bit as good as bunny." He stared into the fire, his face set in grim lines. "When I think of the horses we had to leave tied to that fence, I could kick myself. Both saddles were loaded with supplies, and here we are with one lousy canteen and miles of desert ahead of us."

"Don't blame yourself, Hec. You've already done far more than any ordinary man possibly could. But what I don't understand is how you happened to have those horses there in the first place. You didn't even know the execution had been moved up to this morning, you said, and you only came to the jail to tell me you were leaving right away for the Appeals Court at Santa Fe."

Hec's grimace was a travesty of a smile.

"Honey, when the judge pronounced sentence on you, I finally saw exactly what a powerful, heartless, vindictive old bastard Henry T. Madden really was. The moment McCabe led you back to jail, I galloped to the livery stable, rented two horses and loaded their saddlebags with supplies, just in case legal methods of saving you failed. For all I knew, Henry T. might very well own the Appeals Court, too. I even bought a few sticks of dynamite to blow out the back wall of your cell if I had to to get you free."

"Oh, Hec, Hec—and all these years I went on believing you'd forgotten me."

Hec leaned back on his elbows, still staring into the tiny fire.

"Tell me about you and Milt Brennan, Rose. What does he mean to you?"

"We're just friends, Hec. Very good friends, but that's absolutely all there is or ever has been."

"Is there anybody else? Maybe somebody who's more than just a friend?"

"Why, Hec Ramsey," Savannah said, her eyes shining. "If I didn't know you better, I'd almost think you were jealous." She moved closer and lay down with her head pillowed on Hec's lap, smiling up at him.

"Funny," Hec said soberly. "If you answered my question, I'm afraid I didn't hear it, Rose."

"All right, Hec. There was one man—not too long ago. At first he kind of reminded me of you. But when I got to know him a little better, that impression wore off fast."

"So you dropped him?"

"Like a hot potato. He was pretty sore about it for a while, but I guess he got over it finally. It's the kind of a thing we all have to learn to get over, somewhere along the way."

"Sometimes it isn't all that easy, Rose."

"Wasn't it easy for you, Hec? I thought it must have been, the way you just dropped out of my world and took my sun and moon along with you."

"If it had been easy, I wouldn't have come back."

"Come back?" Savannah sat up sharply. "What do you mean—come back? I thought you stumbled onto me by accident there in Santa Rita."

"I didn't mean Santa Rita," Hec said softly. "I lied to you the other night. That freight train didn't take me to New Orleans at all. It took me exactly where I was heading—back to Texas. But when I got there you'd already left town and nobody seemed to know where you went."

"You really did?" She stared at him, a shining wonder in her face. "Yes, you really *did* come back. I can tell that you did. Ohh, Hec ..."

She fell into his arms, clutching him fiercely.

"You don't know what a difference it makes, knowing that you came back, Hec. Oh, I know it's too late now to ever be like it was back then. But just the knowing makes all the difference in the world."

They were off again at the first light of dawn, with Hec taking the lead and setting a pace that quickly had Savannah reeling and stumbling and falling steadily further behind. The land was barren semi-desert, with neither water nor shade from the savagely-

hammering sun, and no hiding place from their relentless pursuers. Hec had set their course toward a distant wall of rocky foothills, but hours of plodding seemed to bring them little closer.

The posse had not yet come into sight, but he knew they were somewhere behind and relentlessly closing the distance between. Hec had frequently detoured to take advantage of every rock outcropping or strip of hardpan where their tracks would not show. He knew they would pick up the trail again, sooner or later, but every delay for the hunters was a gain for the hunted.

Finally, when it was obvious that Savannah was almost to the end of her endurance, he took pity on her and called a halt for a few minutes' rest. Savannah sank down, her gaze fixed on the canteen slung over Hec's shoulder.

"Can't—can't we have just a tiny little drink of water now, Hec. I'm so thirsty I can't even swallow."

Her lips were cracked, her voice no more than a hoarse croak. Her face was badly sunburned, the skin peeling. Hec grimly shook his head.

"Not yet, Rose. I'm sorry, honey, but I haven't seen a sign of water anywhere around. There are only a few sips left in the canteen, and we're going to need it later even more than we do now. So on your feet and we'll try to struggle along. If we're still in this open country when the posse shows up, we'll be sitting ducks."

Savannah suppressed a groan and struggled to her feet. She gave Hec a weak, sickly smile.

"You want to race me to the next waterhole?"

Hec grinned, gave her shoulder a light squeeze. "Good girl."

He looked back, squinting through the noonday glare, to the higher ground they had left in the early morning. Impossible as it seemed, there was still no sign of their pursuers on the horizon. He could not quite make up his mind whether this was something to be relieved or concerned about.

He turned and they began the long, plodding flight once again.

Unknown to Hec, his evasive tricks and tactics had delayed their pursuers far more than he had dared hope. By the time they had reached the rock-strewn foothills, the posse was still milling around the end of a rock outcropping where they had once again lost the trail.

The members of the posse were family men. For the sake of a little break in the monotony of their daily existence, they had volunteered for the chase, largely on McCabe's glib promise that they would all be back home by noon of the same day. But that noon and a night had

come and gone—a not-too-comfortable night, due to their optimistic lack of preparation for a more extended hunt.

By the second morning they were tired, bone-weary, short-tempered, thirsty, unanimously sore at Sheriff McCabe for what they had begun to consider trickery, and a little more respectfully resentful of the officiousness of Henry T. Madden, who had made it all too clear who was the *real* boss of this crew.

Consequently, instead of an orderly search for the lost tracks, they had milled around without dismounting, managing to make the ground look as if it had been the recipient of a buffalo stampede. Henry T., who had been striving manfully to curb his volatile temper for the sake of his heart, gave them looks of profound disgust and rode on beyond the site of their operations.

Presently McCabe broke away from the group and rode up to join him.

“Yuh know, Mr. Madden, I been thinking, what we ought to do is get us an Indian tracker. Once they get into those rock-covered hills, nobody but an Indian will be able to read sign on them.”

“McCabe,” Madden snarled, with withering scorn, “you’re a fool. An Indian can’t see in the dark any more than we can. And what you need in broad daylight is one old man with two good eyes and an ounce of brains.” He pointed ahead. “What in hell do you think that is over there—the track of a two-headed mermaid?”

McCabe rode a few paces, leaned far over to stare down and shouted, “You’re right. It’s them, sure enough—two sets of tracks.” He waved an arm and bawled, “Over here, boys! Here they are, all right.”

Madden gave the sheriff a look of infinite disgust and spurred on ahead as the posse came charging up. In his mind was the bitter thought: I’ve always known what money *would* buy. Now I’m just beginning to discover what it *won’t* buy.

Hand in hand, the fugitives struggled up the rock-bound hill to the crest and flung themselves down to catch their wind. Hec squirmed around until he could see back in the direction from which they had come. After a few minutes he saw a single dot suddenly appear on the horizon. Then it was joined by a second dot, then a close-bunched group of dots.

Savannah heard his sudden grunt of discovery and started to raise her head. Hec’s big hand clasped the back of her neck and pushed her down until her cheek was against the rock.

“Don’t raise up, Rose. They’re down there, now, and we happen to be in a perfect position to be silhouetted against the sky. Try to crawl

back below the crest before you raise your head.”

When they were safely below the line of sight, they began the long, arduous downhill trek to the valley below. Both were panting and staggering from exhaustion before the trip was completed. Twice Savannah stumbled and fell and Hec dragged her back to her feet, using some of his own waning strength in the effort.

At the foot of the slope he found a hidden nook in which they could rest for a few precious moments.

“Oh, Hec,” she gasped, “won’t they catch up with us if we don’t keep pushing on?”

“Maybe,” he admitted, “but I brought us up by that long detour over rocks so it’ll take them a long time to pick up any tracks again, barring an accidental discovery. Up until now, most of the advantage has been with them, but here among the hills and rocks we’ve got at least a gambler’s chance.”

“Then, if we’re going to gamble anyhow, can’t we have a sip of water?”

“In a little while, now. Meantime, here ...” He scrabbled in the dirt, brought up a marble-sized pebble, dusted it on his sleeve and handed it over. “... put this under your tongue and don’t spit or waste any fluids. It’ll stimulate the saliva glands and you won’t feel quite so burnt out. Now we’d better get moving again. Sitting too long now will make your legs cramp. Think you can make it all right?”

“I doubt it,” Savannah said, mournfully, accepting his offered hand to pull herself back to her feet. “But I’m game to keep right on trying until I fall right on my face.”

Between the range of foothills and the mountains was a scooped-out valley, but one without a running stream or any evidence of groundwater. It was, in fact, merely a tributary of the arid land through which they had been struggling all day.

“We can’t go on much longer without at least something to eat,” Hec said. “Last night’s feast didn’t exactly stick to the ribs, and no breakfast this morning.”

“But I haven’t seen a single rabbit today.”

“I couldn’t risk the noise of a gunshot, even if we did, Rose. But ... Wait a minute! That mesquite! Thank heaven, it isn’t screwbean mesquite. We won’t feast, but we’ll eat.”

“How on earth do you cook mesquite?”

“You don’t,” Hec said. “You eat the pods—and these happen to be honey-pod mesquite, the good-eating kind, with pods that are sweet as sugar cane. Chewing them won’t be exactly the same as eating a steak dinner, but the sugar in them will do a lot to keep your strength and

spirits up. You sit down over there in the shade and rest a couple of minutes, while I climb up and get us two or three handfuls to munch on.”

“You’d better make it *four* handfuls,” Savannah said with a wan smile. “I’m so starved I’ve even been casting wanton looks at your boots.”

Hec grinned, patted her cheek and went scrambling up the steep incline to the little patch of mesquite. There were quite a few of the pea-like pods, but the fattest were down close to the ground and far back in the middle of the growth. Hec squatted down and worked a hand in among the twigs and branches to reach.

Suddenly there was a harsh, metallic rattle and a sharp, stinging pain in the back of his hand. Hec yelped involuntarily and leaped up. He recognized the geometrically-spaced punctures even before he saw the ugly bulk of the diamond-back rattlesnake slithering away over the rocks. Savannah had sprung up at Hec’s cry.

“What is it, Hec? What happened?” Then she glimpsed the heavy jaw-sacs and diamond pattern of the snake sliding across a sun-hot rock. “Hec, you’ve been bitten!”

He was sucking at the wound, then spitting the extracted venom on the ground. He continued the primitive treatment as he slid down and slumped in the shade, methodically sucking and spitting.

“Aren’t you supposed to make a kind of X-mark with your knife over the wound to help drain the poison out quicker?”

“It’s recommended,” Hec said, “but you may remember that I traded mine to that boy at the water-hole for his canteen.”

“Of course,” she whispered. “I had forgotten. But, oh Hec, what can we do? What can I do?”

He was struggling to unbuckle his belt one-handed and to work it out of the loops. He pulled it free and handed it to her, indicating a flat rock a yard or so to one side.

“That rock over there is sandstone, Rose. Take this belt buckle over and see if you can rub it hard enough and long enough to grind a sharp edge on the end of it.”

While Savannah struggled with her task, he got out a handkerchief and tied two diagonal corners together. Slipping it over his hand, he inserted a stick and began to twist the cloth into a tourniquet. When it was almost, but not quite, tight, he inserted a smooth, rounded pebble, then finished twisting the bandage to cut off the flow of poisoned blood to his heart.

When Savannah came from her task of honing the buckle, Hec was lying back, his complexion ashen, sweat pouring down his face. She

knelled over him anxiously, showing him her handiwork on the buckle.

"This is about as sharp as I can get it on the crumbly rock, Hec. Do you think it will do?"

"It's perfect, Rose," he said, trying the edge with his thumb. "I'll bet I could shave with it."

He quickly slashed an X across the fang-marks. Then, as the dark blood burst out, he resumed his rhythmic sucking and spitting. After few moments, he handed the buckle back to Savannah.

"See that barrel cactus over there? It's the big, fat, round one that looks like a green beer keg. Use the buckle to cut a good-size hole in the top—one big enough for you to reach down inside. You'll find it almost full of loose, wet pulp. Shove a handful into your mouth to suck on for moisture and bring me the rest. It'll never replace an icy-cold mountain stream or a quart of Monongahela but it's kept a lot of immigrants and desert rats alive beyond their time."

As she started off toward the cactus, Hec raised his head.

"Be awfully careful, Rose. I understand there are supposed to be rattlesnakes around here."

As soon as she had turned back toward her goal, Hec got a bullet out of his belt and used his teeth to work out the leaden slug, exposing the coarse black powder. He dumped the bulk of this over the wound then got out a kitchen match. His thumb-nail ready to scratch it alright, he hesitated long enough to mutter,

"This is the part I hate the worst, dammit."

He scratched the match and touched it to the mounded powder. Savannah was just turning away from the cactus when the audible *Whuff!* and blinding flash of flame paralyzed her in momentary shock. She ran forward, clutching the dripping mass of cactus pulp.

"Hec, what was it? What, exploded?"

"Nothing, honey. I just cauterized the wound. Now take your handful of that stuff and give me the rest. I read somewhere that snakebite victims are supposed to take in a lot of liquids to help flush the venom out of their system."

"I hope it works, Hec," Savannah said tearfully.

"It usually does," Hec said. "But in about half an hour or so, I'll probably keel over and go out cold for a while. It's what I usually do, so don't let it frighten or upset you. After a few hours I'll probably be sitting up, as good as new—whatever that's worth. Now stuff your pretty mouth with this, and relax."

Both stuffed their mouths with the watery pulp until they resembled overgrown pack rats, then stared at one another's bulging cheeks and almost choked on their laughter. Hec packed the remaining wet pulp



over his wound and started to lie back.

Suddenly he froze, snatched his pistol from its holster and rolled onto his stomach, at the same time gesturing urgently for Savannah to duck behind a rock. From just around a sharp bend in the valley floor came the sound of horses' hooves.

Hec thumbed back the hammer of his six-gun. If this was the posse, catching up at last, he could count the remainder of his life in minutes. But silently he vowed that for them it would be neither an easy nor a bloodless victory.

## Chapter Fifteen

For a few tense moments Hec lay, belly down, gun ready to open fire. Then abruptly some of the tension went out of his body and the six-gun sagged in his hand. Whoever was coming was not the posse. Whether friend or foe, his trained ear told him these were horses without shoes, and no posse would ever ride out on a chase on unshod mounts. He emptied his mouth of the cactus pulp, now drained of most of its fluid, so that he could talk freely and, if necessary, persuasively with the arrivals.

The horses and their riders came into view around the bend and Hec sucked in a sharp breath. They were a half-dozen Indian braves, mounted on spotted ponies. Although they all carried rifles or ancient flintlocks, they were not painted for war, so this was probably a hunting party—but not necessarily a friendly one.

There was, in fact, nothing at all friendly in the speed with which six gun-muzzles whipped up to center on him and on Savannah, who had stepped from behind the rock. Hec laid his pistol down and struggled up onto his elbows, showing empty hands and forcing a travesty of a smile. It was an effort, for his heart was pounding and his brain spinning from the effects of the snake bite. He gritted his teeth, struggling to cling to consciousness. If he were to pass out now, there was no telling what might happen to Savannah.

*“Num-whit,”* he croaked in a weak, uncertain voice, giving the formal greeting and welcome. *“Hook-nah-hay!”*

An expression of fleeting surprise whipped across the arrogant face of the leader, then vanished. Dark eyes glinted with hatred. He gestured sharply with his rifle.

*“Ta-bin-ah!”* he growled. *“Hu-wa’sst! Come on. Stand up!”*

*“Nana hu-wa’sst,”* Hec said, shaking his head. “I can’t stand up. *Rapputak*—rattlesnake.”

He peeled back the layer of pulp to show the fang-marks in his dark and swollen hand. The leader made a jeering sound and spat,

*“Ve-heo mah-son-nes—white men are fools.”*

Hec gathered his strength to snarl back. There followed a rapid-fire exchange of gutturals, with a simultaneous lessening of hostility in the Indian faces. The last vestige of hate vanished when Hec used his last waning strength to shout,

*“Nana ve-heo. Mah Hunkpapa!”*

“For goodness sake,” Savannah muttered softly, kneeling beside him, “what was all that jabbering about? And what was that word you both used several times?”

“You probably mean *veheo*. That’s a Cheyenne word meaning both ‘spider’ and ‘white man’—which gives you a rough idea of what they think of us.”

“At first I expected to be scalped at any moment. Then, just now, you yelled that word and some others and they suddenly changed and now they look almost friendly. What did you say?”

“He said white men are fools, and I said I wasn’t all a white man—I was part Hunkpapa. That tribe is big medicine to almost any plains Indian. Some of the greatest and most honored Indian leaders, including Sitting Bull, were Hunkpapa Sioux. Now I’m practically a blood brother.”

“Apparently you speak their language perfectly. *Are you Indian, Hec?*”

“Honey,” he said, with a weak grin, “in my checkered career I’ve managed to pick up a working knowledge of half a dozen Indian tongues and a smattering of a few more.”

“But *are you, Hec?*”

“Rose, one of the things I’ve always admired about you is that you take things as they come, instead of pestering a man with silly questions.”

The light suddenly went out of his eyes. The lids dropped heavily. His whole body seemed to go limp, and his head fell as consciousness drained out of him.

Down below the Indians were slipping off their ponies. Savannah’s breath locked in her throat until she saw them all carefully lay down their rifles before running up the slope to the aid of their blood brother.

As he had predicted, Hec awoke abruptly, feeling rested and refreshed, the effects of the venom completely gone from his system. He was lying on a comfortable bed of interlaced pine branches in a domeshaped structure he recognized as an Indian wickiup, fashioned of flexible young willows, thatched with leaves and broad-stemmed grasses.

Through the low, round-topped entrance, he could see a grassy slope dappled with evening shadows. He looked around the dusky interior. His holstered pistol lay close to his hand and the canteen hung from a willow stub within easy reach. Near the entrance, strips of dry jerky were draped over a strip of rawhide line. Beside them a

woven mesh bag emitted the mouth-watering fragrance of fresh-roasted venison. The smell made Hec's stomach growl with anticipation.

A shadow darkened the doorway for a moment as Savannah crawled in on her knees, ducking under the low arch of the entrance. She was carefully holding a gourd cup full of water. She saw that Hec's eyes were open and clear, and scrambled over to hand him the half-gourd.

"Drink this, Hec. It's clear and cold from a flowing spring—not like that awful warm stuff in the old canteen. It tastes like stewed boot." She bent and kissed him, smiling happily.

He realized suddenly that she had bathed and fixed her hair. She must also have napped, because her face had lost its haggard line of strain and exhaustion. As Hec lifted the gourd cup to his lips his fingers discovered that he, too, had been bathed and shaved. He drained the cup with relish.

"Ahhh, I could almost live on this stuff, if I didn't get hungry once in a while."

"We've got a cure for that, too," Savannah said, pointing to the mess bag. "He said the roast venison is for now and the jerky's to take along for our traveling."

"He *said*? You mean he speaks English?"

"Not too much, but enough to get his meaning across to me. Hec, you never told me you were part Indian. What is it—Hunkpapa Sioux, really? How does it happen you never mentioned it to me in those days?"

"I don't know," Hec said, sitting up. "I guess maybe I was too young or too dumb to realize it was something I should be proud of."

"You should be. Thank God you finally outgrew that silly notion, Hec Ramsey."

"I did, a long time ago, Rose, along with quite a few other silly ones." He waved a hand around at the dusky room. "You know, this is the first time I've been in a wickiup in a lot of years."

"Is that what this is—a wickiup?"

"That's what they—I mean, *we*—call it. Would you believe it—I hardly remember how I got here."

"Hardly, my foot," Savannah said. "You don't remember one blessed thing about it. You were completely out. I—I was frightened sick for a minute because I actually thought you were dead. Then, when the Indians threw you over the back of a horse like a slab of meat, I was sure of it. But they certainly knew what they were doing. When they got you here, they went to work fast. Look at your hand, now."

Hec held it up to the fading light from the entrance and his eyes widened. The swelling had almost disappeared and there was no lingering pain. New cuts had been made in the area of the bite and the wound covered with a soft, grayish film.

"They did a fine job," Hec said. "Those boys know their business. They have to, because where they live and hunt and fight, there's no trained doctor and druggist just up the street."

"But do you have any idea what they used for the bandage? I could scarcely believe it."

"Sure," Hec said. "That's spider web. Probably the best bandage there is. It not only seals out dirt but even helps to draw the poison out."

"You look so much better now, Hec," Savannah said, snuggling under his sound arm. "Are you sure you feel better, too?"

"Fit as a fiddle, Rose. I told you I would be in a few hours. It always works that way with me."

"*Always*, Hec. You mean you've gone through this before?"

"Often enough so it's time I learned to be more careful where I stick my hands," he said, grinning. He looked around. "It's awfully quiet. Where is everybody?"

"They've all gone, now, Hec. Their leader—I think his name is Black Horse—said any Hunkpapa Sioux could take care of himself from here on."

"Especially when he has a warm and beautiful nurse to minister to his every need. Maybe I should have a relapse, just to give you practical experience."

"Don't you dare," Savannah said. "And you gave me my practical experience years ago." She started to snuggle closer, then suddenly sat straight. "I almost forgot. They said you're positively not to try to travel before morning."

"As if I'd be fool enough to want to," Hec said, tipping back on the bed and pulling her down close beside him. "We've got a whole, long, beautiful night ahead of us for me to—er—recuperate in."

"And it'll be dark soon," she murmured happily.

"Rose," he said suddenly, in a changed tone of voice. "What are you going to do when this nightmare is over and you are out of the whole mess?"

"I don't know, Hec. It's a cinch I couldn't go back to running the Yellow Rose, with old Henry T. Madden now half-owner by inheritance. Maybe I'll get a good lawyer to make the old goat buy out my half. Then I'd have the money to start up a new saloon somewhere else, a long way from Santa Rita."

"It's too bad I'm not the settling-down kind, Rose. But my kind of life—well, it's sort of like a disease, I guess."

"I understand, Hec, and I'd no more try to chain you down than I'd pen an eagle in a canary cage. So let's live what we have while we have it."

Hec was silent for long moments, then quoted softly,

"There's a race of men that don't fit in,  
A race that can't stay still;  
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,  
And they roam the world at will."

"Who wrote that?" Savannah asked, raising herself on an elbow.

"A fellow up in the Far North, by the name of Service. Robert W. Service."

"Damn him," Savannah said softly. "I hope he chokes."

If she had any more comment to make, Hec's lips effectively blocked it.

The morning sun, slanting in through the entrance of the wickiup, awoke Savannah first. Hec, back in deeper shadow, was still sleeping, his arms holding her close. Moving gently and quietly, she worked her way out of his embrace and sat up. Taking the empty drinking gourd, she crawled to the entrance and put her head out.

The next instant she was scrambling back, screaming, "*Hec! Hec!*"

He was off the bed, his gun in his hand, in a split second. He went past her to the entrance and looked out. He recoiled a grunt like a bronc rider who has been kicked in the belly.

The posse sat on their horses in a semicircle a few yards from the wickiup, with Sheriff McCabe and Henry T. Madden in the center of the line. Every one had a rifle trained on the entrance.

"We were about to awaken you, Ramsey," Madden said, "but she saved us the trouble. Now you can save us some more by tossing your gun out here on the grass. And don't waste our time while you try to think up some clever trick. Our eight guns could make a sieve out of those brush walls in a minute—and out of anyone unfortunate enough to be inside them."

Hec looked at Savannah's strained face, shrugged, let his gun hammer down and tossed the weapon well out.

"It was a good try, anyhow, Rose," he said. "At least, we can cheat them out of the satisfaction of seeing us crawl and listening to us whine for mercy. Shall we join them?"

She nodded and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. He ducked down and scrambled out of the wickiup, with Savannah at his heels. McCabe glared at the pair malevolently. Henry T. Madden rubbed his bony, veined hands and regarded them with the expression of a starving cat looking at two fat mice.

“Well, well, well. This is quite a catch we have here, gentlemen. Quite a catch.” He gestured with a jerk of his head. “Tie them up, and make sure you do a thorough job.”

Two of the possemen swung down and took piggin’ strings from their saddlebags, short lengths of extra-stout cord. With Henry T. riding close to watch the procedure with a critical eye, they tied Hec’s and Savannah’s wrists together in front of them, then looked up for further instructions.

“Put them on your horses,” Madden ordered.

“On *our* horses?” One of the pair gasped. “But where are we supposed to ride?”

“You aren’t,” the old man snapped. “You’ll each walk and lead your own horse. And keep an eye on your prisoner every moment.”

With the two unwilling pedestrians grumbling under their breaths and Madden and McCabe in the lead, the little group set out. Henry T. appeared to be actively interested in the landscape, his head swiveling constantly as he examined the ground on either side of their path. McCabe was lost in his own dark thoughts.

“What do you think we ought to do about Hec Ramsey when we get back, Mr. Madden? He’s a hard man.”

“Yes, he is, McCabe. But I have a sneaking suspicion that about twenty years in the Territorial Prison might go a long way toward softening him up.”

“Yes, *sir*,” McCabe said with unconcealed relish. His eyes glittered and his tongue slid out to lick his lips. “It would sure give him plenty of time to think about things, wouldn’t it?” Then some of his elation faded. “But how could we work it—him being a lawman himself?”

“McCabe, when Hec Ramsey invaded your jail, threatened you and your deputies with a deadly weapon, assaulted you to the extent of inflicting severe bodily injury in the course of engineering the escape of a lawfully-condemned murderess, he forfeited all rights, privileges, and protections of his official status.” He paused and fixed the sheriff with a hard and meaningful glare. “Perhaps you are not aware that any lawman who refuses to do his duty, or fails to do it properly through his own incompetence, can be punished by law for his dereliction.”

McCabe scratched his head, scowling.

"I don't know as I understand, exactly, Mr. Madden."

"You will," Henry T. said grimly. "You will, indeed."

They rode on in silence, with Madden continuing his interest in the countryside, and McCabe scowling and gnawing his knuckles while he struggled with the possible meanings of Henry T.'s cryptic conversation. Suddenly the old man saw exactly what he had been looking for. He held up an arm, shouting, "Halt!" Then he reined around to face them.

"We have come far enough, men. This is the place where the law will be upheld and justice administered."

The possemen, mounted or on foot, stared at him blankly. Even Sheriff McCabe looked thoroughly mystified. Only Madden had the gloating look of a mountain lion who has discovered an orphaned calf. Only Hec, who had been watching the old man and had interpreted his reaction a moment before the halt, had a grim idea what was coming.

"You all look puzzled," Henry T. said, with a death's head grin. "So let me clarify it for you. As you are all well aware, Judge P. B. Shelley, in a legal court of law and after due process, sentenced this woman ..." He levelled a bony finger like a pistol at Savannah. "... to be hanged by the neck until dead. But due to the incompetence of certain agents of the law, an unconscionable delay has occurred in the proper carrying out of Judge Shelley's order." McCabe's face had turned a fiery red. Henry T. watched him, grinning, enjoying his squirming discomfiture.

When he had savored his moment to the full, the old man roared, "That delay is now over. Sheriff McCabe, I believe that coil on the side of your saddle is a rope, is it not?"

McCabe, caught momentarily speechless, nodded vigorously. Then, becoming aware of his obligated position in the presence of the mighty Henry T. Madden, he gulped and blurted, "Yes, sir. That's sure what it is."

"Excellent," Madden said. "And over yonder, sheriff, is a gallows designed and constructed by Nature—one far more suitable than the crude monstrosity being erected by your ham-handed carpenters." His pointing finger leveled on a tree near their trail. It had a sturdy branch extending a scant ten feet above the ground, at almost precise right angles to the trunk.

He looked at the stunned, incredulous faces, enjoying the shock they displayed. Then he whirled on the gaping McCabe. "Well, sheriff. This is your opportunity to redeem your disgraceful failure. Do your duty and execute her, exactly as prescribed by law and the sentence of the court."



"Now, just one minute, you power-drunk monster," Hec shouted furiously. "This isn't Federal law, or Territorial law. This is Henry T. Madden law, brought down from the Mount of Money on tablets of stone. If you think ..."

The old man's face purpled with his rage. He pointed a shaking finger at the posseman next to Hec's horse. "You! You've got a rifle with a solid butt, haven't you? Then use it to smash his head in if he mouths another word. That's an order." He beckoned to the posseman at the head of Savannah's horse. "Fetch her over here."

He whirled toward McCabe who, ashen-faced, was trying to complete a hangman's noose in his rope with hands that weren't steady enough for the task. A wave of fury washed up over his pallid cheeks.

"Well, what's the matter with you, you nincompoop? Put that noose around her neck and lead her horse over under that perfect limb. I said I intended to see justice done, and I expect you to execute it because it's your job."

There were murmurs of dissension from the stunned posse. One man growled, "I didn't volunteer to join a goddam lynch-party, mister. We was sucked into this stupid deal with the idea we was going to capture a jail-breaker and an escaped prisoner. I ain't out here in the ass-end of nowhere to lynch no woman."

There were mutters of agreement from the others. Madden, his rage exuding almost like an aura of hate, roared, "Your oath as deputies obligates you to carry out the sentence of the court." He whirled on the trembling McCabe. "What are you stalling for, you incompetent, ineffectual moron? Hang her, *hang her*, HANG HER, damn you!"

"I—I can't, Mister Madden," McCabe gasped, turning his head away from Savannah's cold glare. "I just can't, I tell you. I didn't have any idea it would be like this. You never said a word about its going to be a hangin' party when we set out. Maybe I don't always know what the law says, Mister Madden, but I sure know what my stomach says, and it says I just can't do it."

"You bumbling weakling," Madden sneered. "But I won't insist on your going through with the hanging if it goes against your grain. I want my dead son to be able to rest easy in his grave, and sitting here arguing isn't doing any good. If you feel so squeamish about it, McCabe, I won't insist on your carrying out the court-ordered execution."

"You *won't*?" McCabe asked, wonderingly.

"Of course not. All I ask of you is one simple thing that can't bother your conscience or spoil your sleep. I suddenly realize that I've been more or less leading this posse, but in no official capacity. So I think,

to keep the records straight and our books clear, you'd better swear me in as a deputy, so this will be a thoroughly legal chase."

"Of course," McCabe babbled, almost falling over himself in his relief. "I see what you mean. Yes, *sir*, Mr. Madden. All you have to do is raise your right hand and repeat after me ..."

The brief, meaningless ceremony took only moments. The sheriff dug out an extra deputy's badge and ostentatiously pinned it on Henry T. Madden's expensive shirt. "You do swear to uphold ...?"

"I do," Henry T. said, then in a brisker tone, "Now, as a duly sworn-in deputy, I have the full legal right to carry out the execution decreed by the law. Let me have that noose."

Still bemused by the swift interplay of commands and ideas, McCabe obediently handed over the rope. Madden eyed it in disgust, then swiftly retied the traditional thirteen loops of the knot into recognizable shape.

## Chapter Sixteen

He was just finishing his handiwork, looking up from it to glare at McCabe, when Hec suddenly loosed a wild Comanche Indian howl and drove both heels into the flanks of the horse. The nervous animal spooked and bolted, tearing the lead-rope out of the hands of the disgruntled posseman. Hec continued to boot the panic-stricken animal, spurring its fright with imitations of the cries of predatory animals at which Indians were so adept.

The animal stampeded through between McCabe's horse and that of Henry T., almost knocking both mounts down and unseating the riders. Then it was in the clear and pounding off. Behind him he could hear the voice upon which he had depended—the voice of Henry T. Madden—bawling, “Don't shoot! *Don't shoot*, you damn fools! He must be taken alive—*alive!*”

Hec knew exactly why his life had abruptly become precious to the arrogant autocrat of New Mexico Territory, and it gave him a moment's grim satisfaction. His death, as a lawman investigating an obviously-rigged trial, would cause all kinds of repercussions, and launch questions and investigations that would strain even the great god Madden's wealth and power to squelch.

There were no more wild gunshots, but the sound of hammering hooves told him the deputies were racing in pursuit, all inspired by the hope of a fat Madden bonus. Well, in a matter of moments they would be more than welcome to earn that bonus by recapturing him—with his own subtle cooperation.

As he rode, Hec had been furiously sawing his wrist-bonds up and down against the razor-sharp edge of the belt buckle Savannah had honed. He felt one strand of the heavy cord snap, then another and another. Behind him he could hear the pounding hooves growing louder as the deputies, with spurs on their boots and whip hands free, rapidly narrowed the gap between them. It was working out exactly as he had hoped when he had set off this apparently rash and senseless explosion of violence.

When his pursuers sounded close enough, Hec slipped his feet out of the stirrups and rolled off the racing horse. Early years as a bronco buster had taught him the ways to fall off a horse with a minimum of physical damage. He used that priceless knowledge now to fall and land and roll with bones unbroken and breath in his lungs. Not one of the aging ranchers or farmers who made up the posse would be apt to

recognize the tricks involved.

He sat up, panting, making a fine show of miraculous recovery from what might have been a fatal fall. A matter of sheer luck that he was not dead of a broken back or broken neck or crushed skull. He even added a realistic groan and swayed as if completely dazed by the impact. He had felt the final strand of piggin' cord give way, and as he struggled to sit up he used his little fingers to gather in the cut ends of the cord and hold them taut against the outer side of his wrists. From all outward appearances, he was still helplessly bound.

The leading posseman flung himself off his horse and covered Hec with his gun.

"I heard you were smart, Ramsey, but that was a damfool stunt if I ever saw one. All you accomplished was to get yourself a few lumps you didn't have to have. You didn't gain one inch."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Hec said, making a great production of getting onto his feet with his hands still tightly bound in front. "I just wanted to see if you boys were wide awake, and I must say I'm a bit disappointed in you. Any really alert fellows would have cornered me in a dozen jumps."

The possemen cursed him heartily, nudged him up onto his feet, and guarded him back to the main party with elaborate caution. Henry T. Madden watched his approach with sour enjoyment.

"Good work, men. I promise you, this won't be forgotten." He turned his hate-filled glare on Hec. "Bring him over here. This is one thing I want him to watch real close."

Savannah, with the reshaped hangman's knot under her ear and the rope around her throat, was being boosted back onto her horse. The end of the rope had already been tossed over the low branch and secured to the tree trunk. Madden, grinning, switched his trouser-legs with a quirt. When he was ready, one savage blow of the quirt would send the horse plunging out from under the tree and leave Savannah dangling helplessly at the end of the rope.

"Come on, Ramsey," Madden said, switching his legs with the quirt. "Come over close. I want you to enjoy every minute of this final episode in the story of justice."

Back on his horse, his hands ostensibly still bound, Hec was led to the tree where Savannah awaited her fate.

"So you had to play the rat leaving the sinking ship, Ramsey. Somehow, I didn't really look for you to turn coward quite so soon, but I suppose it's the normal reaction of you opportunists who grab your sweets any time and anywhere you can, and to hell with the consequences—or the victims."

"Oh," Hec said, shrugging, "I was only stalling for time, Henry T. Has-been."

"That is a sick stall, Ramsey. I expected better of you, somehow. What could a few minutes of time possibly buy for you now?"

"A whole lot," Hec said. "It could bring Milt Brennan here, for example, to make you show the whole countryside what an arrogant, narrow-minded, egomaniac you really are."

"Brennan?" Madden barked. "What has he got to do with this cut-and-dried affair? You're stalling, Ramsey, trying to hide your failure behind a screen of nasty charges." He whirled, slashing the quirt against his boot-tops. "Come on, come on. Let's get this hanging over with, so my son can rest easy in his lonely grave. And so I can sleep nights again, knowing his murderess has paid for her dastardly crime."

"Oh, come off it, you stupid ass," Hec said wearily. "I can see now that you're only shooting off your mouth to prove again what a great man you are—and to soothe your own conscience over murdering an innocent woman. You know as well as I do that your day is done, Henry T. Madden. There are elements here in this land that not even your money can buy."

"I've heard enough of this sanctimonious psalm-singing," Madden squalled. "Is the rope tight? Are we ready for the hanging?"

"Hold on, Madden," Hec said flatly. "You'd better listen to me and listen real good, or you're going to find yourself in a pack of trouble that all the Madden money in the West can't buy off."

"I'm going to be in trouble?" Madden yelled, shaking his quirt in Hec's face. "You're a very clever dodger, Hec Ramsey, but you've dodged your last dodge." He spun toward the posseman holding the head of the horse on which Savannah was seated. "Get out of the way. I'm having the hanging right now. I've waited long enough for this moment."

"You're supposed to be the great brain, the smart one who listens and learns from everybody else to pad his own pockets," Hec said. "This time you'd better listen and learn if you don't want to wind up either behind bars or facing those *crude* gallows yourself."

The old man turned sharply. He stared at Hec's grim, set face.

"Whatever you have to say, Ramsey, come out with it. I'll give you one minute to have your say before I make one slash of this quirt and your saloon-keeping, whore-mongering girl friend dies on the end of a rope."

"The walls upstairs at the Yellow Rose are thin as paper, Madden. The girl in the room next to Savannah's heard the whole thing—the beating she got, the murder and the voice of the murderer. She knows

exactly who *really* killed your son, but she ran away scared before I could persuade her to testify, and I don't blame her. When a murderer has killed once, he has no compunction about killing again to protect his identity. Both Milt Brennan and I know who she is and where she is. Milt went to get her testimony. She isn't so afraid to talk, now, because she knows she's not in Santa Rita any more, and neither is he."

"If you had any such evidence," McCabe broke in, "the time to bring it out was the trial. But the trial is over, now, so you're only blatting to kill time. Shall I bust his dumb head open for you, Mr. Madden?"

Neither Hec nor Henry T. paid the slightest attention to the interruption. The old man glared at Hec, but his expression held a certain wariness, perhaps a growing awareness of his own vulnerability under the circumstances.

"Go on," he rasped. "You talk big. What do you mean, she won't be afraid to talk now?"

"Because the murderer she can identify, the man she's been hiding from, isn't in Santa Rita now."

"Why don't you let me bust his skull and shut him up for good?" McCabe demanded, panting. "You let him go on and on like this and he'll bend our ears the rest of the day and not say one damn thing, Mr. Madden."

"Oh, shut up, McCabe," Henry T. barked, without taking his hard stare from Hec Ramsey. He said, "Your minute's almost up, Ramsey. You got anything to say besides empty talk?"

"Plenty," Hec said. "You didn't know it, but you did her, and yourself, a big favor when you took the real murderer out of Santa Rita with you and gave the witness time to get some of her courage back."

"What do you mean?" Madden barked.

"Don't waste time listening to him, Mr. Madden," McCabe said. "He's talking out of crazy desperation, now. He'll make any outrageous charge to keep his girl friend from hanging for a few more minutes. I can bust his skull, Mr. Madden, and save you a lot of nasty lies. He's so desperate now, he'll probably even say it was me did that killing, not the girl at all. He's grabbing at any and every straw he can think of to postpone what has to be done."

Neither Hec nor Henry T. even bothered to look at the red-faced, sweating sheriff.

"I'll tell you exactly what I mean," Hec said grimly. "I'm telling you that the man who murdered your son, Brock, is here with you, buttering you up and covering his tracks—he hopes. He can't wait to

have you commit murder on an innocent woman because he figures that will leave him completely in the clear. She got the blame. She died for it. Case closed. That's the kind of skunk you get when you try to buy loyalty with money. If Savannah weren't the innocent victim, there's nothing I'd like better than to pull out and let you stew in your own rotten juice, you sanctimonious, arrogant bastard."

"I'll kill him," McCabe squawled, snatching out his gun. "I'll cave his goddam skull in, talking that way to a gentleman like you, Mr. Madden."

"Maybe you'd better, Bert," Savannah broke in shrilly, speaking for the first time from her place under the hanging tree limb. "Because while Hec lives, your life isn't worth a buffalo chip. He knows, and I know, that *you're* really the one who killed Brock Madden with those shears. I was being choked unconscious that night, but I haven't been able to shake off a-kind of crazy dream that *you* were there, too—bursting in and looking at me over his shoulder, then running around the bed to grab my shears. I tried to tell myself it was some kind of a nightmare, but now I know it wasn't."

"Shut up!" McCabe howled, sweat running down his flushed face. "Shut up, *shut up!* You and him! You're two of a kind, you two. I wouldn't be one bit surprised if it wasn't him that followed you home and broke in and murdered poor Brock for you. Oh, I know where you went with that bottle of *his* favorite whiskey, and where you spent half the night in his bed, you tramp, you whore! I saw you go out and I saw you come back, and I saw you in the window of his front room, unbuttoning your dress."

"Yes," Savannah said again, with great positiveness. "*It was you.* Of course it was. It *had* to be you, Bert. You didn't rush in to save me from being beaten and choked and possibly killed by Brock Madden. You rushed in and murdered Brock to get revenge on me. That's why you put the handcuffs on me and dragged me to your jail, with Brock lying dead on the floor."

"Don't listen to her," McCabe shrilled, waving his arms at Henry T. "Don't you see what they're doing, both of them? They're trying to save themselves by putting the blame on me."

"The blame is on you," Savannah said flatly. "You've been mad with jealousy ever since I broke off my brief little affair with you. It wasn't that you were desperate for me. It was because I hurt your pride. You couldn't face up to the knowledge that you were something less than God's gift to women—even to a saloon woman, as you told me that night we parted."

"I hope you haven't turned off your ear-trumpet, Henry, old boy," Hec said. "Because this is probably one of the rare times in your life

when you're getting some honest truths, not the usual brown-nosing you're accustomed to from your hirelings."

"But what really drove you clear off your tea-cozy was when Hec showed up and you saw how much we'd meant to one another in the past. You couldn't stand even the thought of a man who was not only smarter and nicer and kinder than you'd ever be, but who had enjoyed something in the past that you'd never in a lifetime be able to claim. When a poor, weak mind is pushed so far, the only response it can come up with is murder. *You—murdered—Brock—Madden.*"

McCabe was reduced to waving his arms and howling incoherently. Madden suddenly ducked his head and turned away, to tramp off to one side, away from the group. It was, Hec reflected, probably one of the only times in history when Henry T. Madden's face had reflected uncertainty, confusion and self-doubt. He looked back and saw that the faces of the posse also reflected the same doubt and lack of assurance.

He turned toward Savannah, seated on the posseman's horse underneath the heavy limb of the gallows tree. The coarse rope was tight around her neck, where the ugly marks of Brock Madden's strangling hands were still dark against her snowy skin. The hangman's knot, with its traditional thirteen turns was under her left ear but the rope was still loose, and most of the knot rested on her shoulder. Her bound hands rested on the horn of the saddle.

Hec was shaken by a surge of mingled fury at her helpless condition, and by a fierce pride in her proud bearing. In spite of the peril she faced, her eyes were clear and unafraid and her expression was one of scorn and loathing for her brutal tormentors. She looked toward Hec, and her expression softened for a moment. He returned her look, trying to telegraph a message of hope and confidence.

Henry T. Madden still stood with his back to them, his sagging shoulders and the fierce grip of his skeletal hands on the quirt revealed the inner conflict that was wracking him. They were all watching, feeling the tension as they waited for his decision. With the possible exception of McCabe, their expressions all mirrored a common revulsion toward the hanging of a woman, but they were too much in awe of the Madden name and Madden power for open rebellion.

Watching the old man, Hec saw the bowed shoulders suddenly straighten and his head come up. Henry T. Madden had finally reached his conclusion. He turned and came back to the group, walking with the awkward, stiff-legged gait of the arthritic. His expression was carefully blank, revealing nothing of what was in his mind.



He gathered up the reins of his horse and began the slow, painful business of hauling himself back into the saddle. McCabe sprang forward to boost him up, grabbing Madden under the arms as if he were a child. The old man twisted out of his grasp and turned a furious face.

"Keep your big hands off me," he snarled savagely. "There are still a couple of things I can do for myself, and one of them is get on a horse."

McCabe leaped back, flushing. They were all silent while Henry T. laboriously completed his climb. Panting from his efforts, he settled into his saddle and neck-reined his horse around so that he could face both Hec and Savannah. His cold, arrogant gaze shifted from one to the other.

"I have thought it all through carefully," he rasped at last, "and have reached a conclusion. You two are a pair of extremely accomplished liars. Your arguments were most convincing, but I don't believe one word of them. You were simply talking in an effort to save your own worthless skins. Do you know what finally convinced me?"

He waited, his eyes alight with malicious glee as he savored this suspense he was building up. He twisted thin, cruel, bloodless lips into a travesty of a smile before continuing.

"I grant you, McCabe is a pretty miserable specimen of either a man or a sheriff, but I'll stake everything on this: McCabe did not kill my son, for any reason. I'm positive of that, because Bert McCabe wouldn't have the guts, and killing anyone takes guts." He pointed a trembling finger at Savannah and his face twisted into an expression of pure malevolence. "I have no doubt whatever that that woman killed Brock. But even if I'm wrong, she is the one responsible for his being killed. For that she is going to pay the full penalty, and pay it *right now*."

He shifted the quirt to his right hand and spurred up close to the flank of Savannah's mount. One savage slash of the whip and her horse would bolt from under her, leaving her to dangle and die on the gallows tree.

Madden lifted the quirt high and snarled, "This is for Brock."

In one swift, totally unexpected blurr of motion, Hec threw off the severed bonds he had been holding on his wrists, snatched the deputy's rifle from its saddle boot and swung it like a club. The heavy barrel caught Henry T. Madden on the side of the jaw and swept him out of the saddle like a sack of meal. He struck the ground heavily and lay unmoving.

Startled by the suddenness of the action, McCabe froze for critical moments. Then he bellowed and grabbed for his gun. But, in those

fatal moments, Hec completed the arc of his swing with the rifle and fired from the hip. His slug caught McCabe in the chest and knocked him backward, out of the saddle. McCabe's belated return shot went harmlessly into the air.

Hec lunged and caught the bridle of Savannah's horse with his left hand, fearful that the eruption of gunfire might spook it into bolting. His right hand turned the rifle downward until its muzzle was centered on the chest of the posseman on foot.

"Get that rope off her neck and off her wrists. Off the neck first. Move!"

"Yes, *sir*."

While the frightened man hastened to obey, Hec swung the rifle around toward the rest of the posse. Three or four of them had their guns drawn, but not aimed directly at Hec. Their expressions were those of men startled, confused and not at all eager to take sides in so controversial a conflict.

"It's up to you men," Hec snapped in a cold, brittle tone of voice. "You with your guns out. If you want to start something, the odds are all with you. But I give you my solemn promise—the first man who shoots is going to die with me."

They looked at Hec's blazing eyes and at the two motionless figures on the ground. Then they dropped their pistols back into their holsters. Hec swung to the ground and ducked around to help Savannah out of the saddle. She leaned against him, trembling with reaction. Hec supported her with his free arm and waited for the moment of weakness to pass.

The posse had gathered over the figure of Henry T. Madden. The deputy sheriff squatted down to roll the old man over. His head came up sharply, his face sagging.

"Mr. Madden is dead."

One of the posse said, "Must have been his heart. It's been a long time a-coming. And, if you ask me, it couldn't have happened to a more deserving fellow."

Another, with a flash of dark gallows humor, said to the deputy, "Wherever he is, I'll bet old Henry T. is calling you a liar."

No one gave more than a perfunctory glance toward the body of Sheriff Bert McCabe, and none of their faces held any expression of overwhelming grief for either victim.

Savannah gave Hec a wan smile and pushed herself erect.

"You all right now, Rose?" he asked anxiously.

"I am now—thanks to you, Hec. I'm still a little shaky, but that will go away in a few minutes, when I finally manage to convince myself

I'm really alive."

"You were great, honey. You certainly showed them the stuff you're made of."

"You weren't exactly sobbing and pleading either, Hec."

They smiled at one another. Then they stood, watching, as the posse wrapped the bodies in blankets and tied them on behind the saddles of two of the more docile horses. They both turned sharply at the sound of a distant shout. A lone horseman was pounding down the slope of a hill at a breakneck pace, waving his hat in the air.

Hec squinted and said, "It's Milt Brennan. If he's bringing the right news, your troubles are practically over, Rose."

They waited for Brennan to reach them and climb stiffly down from his saddle. He was covered with dust, and there were lines of deep weariness etched into his face, but his eyes were bright.

"How in blazes did you ever find us?" Hec demanded.

"Remember, you said we'd rendezvous at Ladrones Peak when I got back? Well, I was on my way there when I heard gunshots and figured you might be behind one of the guns. So here I am."

"And glad to see you. How did your trip work out?"

"Perfectly. Savannah, you're in the clear all the way. Kate was where I figured she'd be, and I finally persuaded her to talk. It was McCabe who stabbed Brock with those shears. Kate heard everything, and was absolutely petrified for fear he would remember the thin wall and come next door to shut her mouth permanently. She finally went so far as to give me a signed statement describing everything." He paused, glancing around. "I don't see McCabe. Would he, by any chance, be rolled up in one of those blankets?"

Hec nodded grimly, adding, "And Henry T. Madden's in the other one. His heart gave out."

"There's nothing like a clean sweep of the opposition. But I'm only sorry I missed out on the action, here."

"It's your own fault, Brennan. You were so pokey we decided not to wait for you."

"You done the right thing, Ramsey." He turned to his lathered horse and got a pint bottle of Monongahela whiskey out of a saddle bag. "You look pretty peaked, Savannah. A snort of this might liven you up."

"Thanks, Milt," she said, taking the bottle. "You're a godsend."

She tipped up the bottle, then passed it on. Each of the men took a deep pull. Then Brennan heeled in the cork and handed the bottle back to Hec.

"The rest is all yours, you two. You've more than earned it. I'll get

mine when I get back to town and find out if I still have a hotel to manage. Take care of yourselves.”

He climbed into the saddle, waved a farewell, and headed back the way he had come. Hec turned to the posse who had been listening, wide-eyed, to Brennan’s report.

“You all got the story, so you know now how close you came to the murder of an innocent woman. When you get back to town, tell the whole story to whoever’s in charge of the sheriff’s office. Tell him we’ll be in tomorrow to take care of the formalities and clean up any details. You have Madden’s and McCabe’s horses to use now, so we’ll keep these two for the time being. You’ll get them back when we go in tomorrow.”

The posse mounted, waved and rode off. Savannah had been staring intently at Hec, a curious expression on her face.

“You keep saying we’ll do this or that *tomorrow*, Hec. Now that we have horses, why didn’t we just ride back to town with them or with Milt?”

“Well, it’s this way, Rose. Those Indian brothers of mine went to a lot of trouble building that wickiup back there. It served us so well last night that I felt it would be a crying shame to have it go to waste tonight.”

He gave her a broad wink, and what was meant to be a bawdy leer. Savannah giggled, then glanced upward toward the noon sun, now almost directly overhead.

“It’ll be dark soon, Hec. What are we waiting for?”

On the crest of a distant ridge, a little band of Indian hunters watched the man and the woman climb onto their horses and ride off, side by side, in the direction of the wickiup. At a sign from Black Horse, they silently turned their ponies then and dropped out of sight below the skyline.

They had been sitting there for a long time, watching. Though they held their rifles constantly at ready, they had made no move to interfere or to make their presence known.

As Black Horse had so wisely said the day before: Any Hunkpapa Sioux could take care of himself.